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Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.

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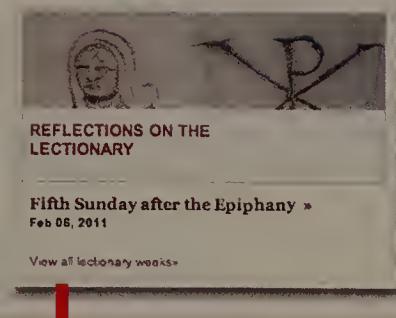
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urrent week

A screenshot of the Christian Century website's 'All weeks' section. It shows a grid of cards for different weeks. One card for 'Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany' on Feb 06, 2011, is highlighted. Other cards show 'Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany' (Feb 13), 'Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany' (Feb 20), and 'Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany' (Feb 27). A red arrow points down from this section.

All weeks

All Lectionary Weeks
lectionary-related content sorted by week

A screenshot of the Christian Century website's search interface for lectionary weeks. It includes filters for 'FILTER BY SEASON' (Lent) and 'FILTER BY YEAR' (Year A). Below the filters, there are sections for Lent (Ash Wednesday, Mar 09, 2011) and First Sunday in Lent (Mar 13, 2011).

- Go to the home page at christiancentury.org and look for the link to "Reflections on the Lectionary." Here you'll see lectionary columns, blog posts and other commentary on the readings for the current Sunday (or holiday) in the RCL's three-year cycle.
- For upcoming weeks, see the links on the left. Or click "More reflections" to browse the whole cycle by season or year.

You'll have access to everything in our online archives that treats that week's lectionary readings.

THE
Christian
CENTURY
christiancentury.org

by John M. Buchanan

The baseball life

I DISCOVERED the allure of baseball at the age of ten, when the sport became the organizing principle of my life. In the summer, I'd head to the ball field in the morning, wait until five or six other players showed up, then begin a game of first bounce or fly, in which a batter continues to hit until one of his batted balls is caught on the first bounce or in the air. As the morning wore on and more players arrived, we'd start a full pickup game.

We'd begin with an elaborate ritual for choosing players. Two self-appointed captains would meet. One threw a bat to the other, who caught it in one hand. Then the two would grasp the bat hand-over-hand until one of them was holding the knob on the end. That allowed him to make the first choice of players—unless his rival could squeeze fingers around the tip of the handle and hold it tightly enough to hurl it backward, over his head, for a prescribed distance, in which case he got to make the first choice. Players were chosen until the last player was assigned to a team by default. It was humiliating to be exposed as the least desirable player, but it was preparation for life, I suppose, in which one has to proceed in the face of adversity and low expectations.

The games continued until lunchtime, when the players dispersed, only to return for more baseball in the afternoon. Afternoon play was occasionally supervised by a playground

director who supplied a real ball and bat and actual bases. (Morning equipment consisted of a ball whose cover had long since disappeared; it and a cracked bat were wrapped tightly with black electrician's tape.) After supper—in industrial Pittsburgh, lunch was the main meal and supper was served at 4:30—we would be back at the ball field to watch a city league game, and if one of us was truly fortunate, he might serve as a batboy with the opportunity to be around genuine adult players. The day often ended on our front porch as we listened to the radio broadcast of a Pittsburgh Pirates game. The voices of the announcers, Rosie Rosewell and Bob Prince, were as familiar to us as the voices of our parents.

Playing the game every day or watching one and reading the daily box scores taught me the lesson that success is rare and precious when it happens. Baseball players mostly stand around waiting for something to happen. When a ball is finally hit, a flurry of activity ensues, but it is soon over and the waiting resumes. The other valuable lesson baseball teaches is that the very best hitters fail at least two-thirds of the time. All the while, the Pirates, who struggled to attain mediocrity, taught me to love in spite of empirical data—which is not unlike the act of faith. They prepared me for the past 25 years of being a Cubs fan.

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Spring books, serious Christians

The CENTURY is to be commended for the regular features that highlight books in several areas, as in the spring books issue (May 2). But the issue could be improved in several ways that would make it an even more profound contribution to thinking critically and living faithfully.

First, the issue could note how the e-book is making enormous inroads into our reading habits. Where are the best sellers of digital products being noted? More awareness of e-books and digital resources is needed—especially for those who serve a small church away from a major library or who teach at an institution that lacks strong resources. Access to digital publications is one of the unequivocal positives arising out of the digital revolution.

Second, the publishers whose titles are listed in the CENTURY are strong publishers, but there are other publishers and other titles that deserve attention. If the list of best sellers represents a selection of publishers with specific relationships to the CENTURY, it would be best to state that.

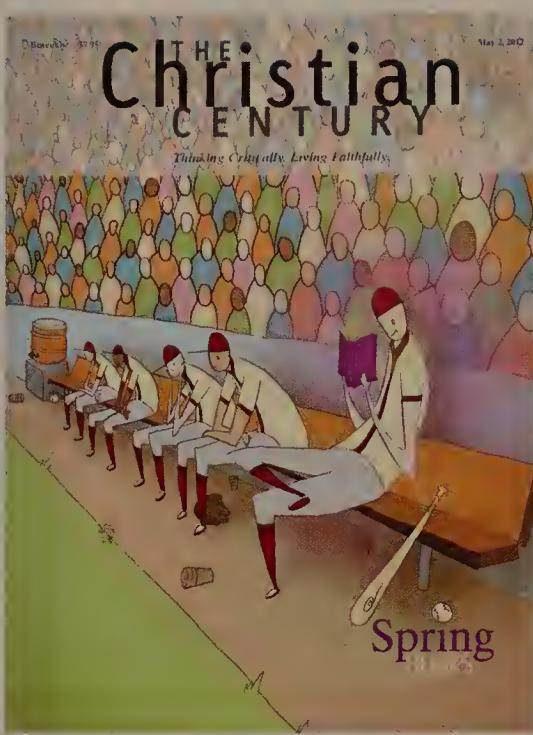
Finally, I commend the way that the CENTURY makes readers aware of issues across faiths in the news section, in articles and in reviews. What is not done is to stretch beyond the “master narratives” of Christianity or of Protestantism. Such stretching can be seen in a striking way in the May 2 letters section via the letter from two rabbis.

*Kent Harold Richards
Mystic, Conn.*

Editors note:

The best-seller lists cited in the spring and fall books issues are derived from a variety of publishers of religious books that we think are of interest to our readers.

I was taken aback by the editors’ statement, “It is hard to think of a serious Christian not being a reader.”



(“The lure of books,” May 2). It sounds like the writers have a hard time imagining anyone not like them being a serious Christian. I work with people who have developmental disabilities and their families, and many feel unwelcome in their churches due to this type of dismissal of their loved ones.

Who qualifies as a serious Christian? Only the smart, educated, literate people who have resources and time to read to be more informed? Ouch!

*Emily Levine
Milwaukee, Wis.*

Restructuring needed . . .

I read with appreciation the thoughtful article on the United Methodist restructuring by Robert J. Harman (“A global identity,” April 4). As one who served with distinction on the staff of the General Board of Global Ministries, he knows whereof he speaks.

One sentence, however, reflects a common misunderstanding. In referring to the proposal for restructuring

that came before the General Conference (and was eventually ruled out of order on constitutional grounds) he says, “The mechanics of the proposal empower the bishops to downsize the governance structure.” Unfortunately, that is not the case. The proposal would downsize the program structure of the denomination, not the governance structure. The boards and agencies are creatures of the General Conference and not the reverse. It is the conference structure—General, Jurisdictional and Annual—which is the governance structure of the church. The conference system is the locus of policy and decision making.

I am not in opposition to what Harman has said. I sincerely wish that the plan to modify the structure of the UMC did focus on the governance and not on the program structure. The denomination lacks an effective decision-making, policy-setting governance system.

What should have been done some time ago was to create an executive committee that could function between sessions of the General Conference. The task of the General Conference would be to set the perimeters of the authority of the executive committee. Such a governance system would facilitate informed decision making and create an administrative oversight system parallel to the ecclesial oversight of congregations provided by bishops.

It is not appropriate for the Council of Bishops to assume an authority that they cannot fulfill and for which they cannot be held accountable. The delegation of authority requires accountability. In our system this can be done primarily by elections. What needs to happen is a restructuring of the governance system so that effective management decisions can be made.

*Paul McCleary
Clarkdale, Ariz.*

Junk food epidemic

May 30, 2012

Michelle Obama wanted to expand access to fresh, healthful food; Walmart wanted to expand into urban markets. When the First Lady and the retail giant got together last year to try to eliminate food deserts—low-income areas where there's nowhere to buy fresh produce—many hoped this effort would put a dent in obesity and other public-health problems.

But recent studies have found little connection between food deserts and obesity. Whatever benefits a supermarket provides, improving people's diet doesn't seem to be among them. After all, even supermarkets offer more junk than healthful food—and the junk is more convenient, alluring and affordable.

Making healthful food available isn't enough. People need to acquire the habit of eating well. Such habits are learned in families and communities. Forming good habits involves fighting unhealthful traditions (as Mississippi pastor Michael Minor is doing in banning fried chicken at church meals) and reconnecting to the land (see the article on p. 24), as in projects that help children from low-income families grow vegetables. (This is an area in which Mrs. Obama has provided leadership.)

Public policy has a role to play as well. Exhibit A is the federal school lunch program. Public school cafeterias serve millions of low-income children on the taxpayer's dime. Yet they have been thoroughly colonized by the fast-food industry, and even their unbranded meals are mostly prefab and nutritionally lacking. Some cafeterias are trying to return to making simple, wholesome meals from scratch. But they need support from school boards—and from Congress, which both drastically underfunds the school lunch program and blocks nutritional standards in order to placate junk food lobbyists.

The school lunch program is required to incorporate excess commodity food from the Department of Agriculture, which points to a second problem: the U.S. subsidizes the overproduction of grains and soybeans, creating a glut of artificially cheap carbohydrates, fats and animal proteins. To improve public health, fruits and vegetables need to be not just available but price competitive with the array of grocery-aisle junk the current system produces.

Here, too, community efforts play a role. Many farmers markets accept food stamps; some also offer income-based discounts. Farm-based gleaning programs are notable as well.

But the root problem, again, is bad policy. It would be a huge step if the government stopped propping up grain and soy bean production and used the money to subsidize vegetables instead—or simply added the funds to the school lunch program. But agribusiness exerts massive control over farm-state lawmakers. Though the omnibus farm bill is up for reauthorization this year, food activists are pessimistic about serious reform.

The junk food status quo is not the natural order of things. When general food shortages were a serious concern, the government stepped in with subsidies to make sure that farmers produced enough food. Today Americans face different issues and so require different policies. Families, churches and communities can take responsibility for local food cultures, but elected officials need to step up as well.

The government is subsidizing the wrong food products.

CENTURY marks

NO FIRST CLASS: In 1979 the late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador visited an urban slum where people lived in shelters made from scrap tin and cardboard. A reporter traveling with Romero asked: "How do you feel when you see a community like this?" Romero responded: "I just think of what I have already preached. There shouldn't be first-class people and second-class people" (*Spiritual Life*, Spring).

GOD AND OTHERS: Aging is accompanied by a sense of loss and diminishment, especially in energy and health. Lewis Richmond believes that relying on something greater than ourselves, like God, can compensate for the loss. Research indicates that people who go to religious worship services at least once a week live seven years longer than those who don't. This is especially true for people who combine such attendance with service to others (*Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, Gotham Books).

REAL SPIRITUALITY: The Vietnam War underscored for Ismael García the colonial status of Puerto Rico. An inordinate number of Puerto Ricans were drafted to fight that war, even though they couldn't engage in electing the people who were responsible for it. García was also disappointed in the church at the time, because he thought it ignored social and political realities on the island and focused instead on whether it was appropriate for women to wear slacks and how long men's hair should be. In time García, who became a Christian ethicist, discovered Christians who modeled a life of social activism and inner spiritual devotion. He identified three traits of these Christians: they view God as sovereign in all spheres of life; they are committed to projects and concerns larger than their own personal interests; and they know that faithful living entails social analysis and cultural interpretation ("On Spirituality," in *A Spiritual Life*,

edited by Allan Hugh Cole Jr., Westminster John Knox).

TIME-OUT: Flora Slosson Wuellner witnessed a congregational business meeting in which deliberations would cease after every half hour and the congregation would sit in silence for five minutes, attending to the Spirit's promptings. People would take turns holding a stopwatch. After the silent periods, "the tone of the talk and planning changes, attitudes changed, disagreements were handled differently, fresh options were envisioned," Slosson Wuellner says (*Weavings*, May).

PRISON MINISTRY: Writing about Prison Fellowship, founded by the late Chuck Colson, Mark Oppenheimer points out that there have been two impulses behind incarceration in the U.S. One, with Christian underpinnings, focused on reforming the imprisoned; the other, which took hold especially in the South during the era of slavery, promoted harsh living conditions and punitive labor (think chain gangs and labor farms). Colson advocated for less crowded, more humane prisons. His critics say that Prison Fellowship doesn't challenge the prison system so much as work toward the spiritual reformation of individual prisoners. Studies are mixed on whether such a ministry turns prisoners away from a life of crime once they're back on the street (*New York Times*, April 27).



"YOU WITHY COLLEGE GRADS WITH YOUR SAD STORIES OF LOW PAY AND CRUSHING DEBT—DO YOU THINK SOMEONE JUST GAVE US THIS BUSINESS? WELL...ACTUALLY, OUR FATHER DID GIVE IT TO US, BUT THAT'S BESIDE THE POINT!"

CHANGING ORIENTATION: Robert Spitzer, retired psychiatrist at Columbia University, has retracted his controversial 2001 study that claimed gays and lesbians could be cured of their homosexuality through therapy. The so-called "ex-gay" movement used his argument to push what they called "reparative therapy," which claims that with strong motivation

lesbians and gays can become straight via therapy or prayer. Ironically, Spitzer was one of the mental health professionals who urged the American Psychiatric Association to stop classifying homosexuality a mental disorder, which it did in 1973 (Southern Poverty Law Center, April 11).

SING OUT: People still sing together in churches and ballparks, but what is absent in America, say Karen Loew, is “community-oriented, community-building, sometimes spontaneous” singing. One obstacle is the lack of a common repertoire of songs. “Since we’re out of practice as a society, the person who dares to begin a song risks having no one join her.” Protest movements have long been known by their music. While the Occupy movement has incorporated some music, it has not generated original music (*Atlantic*, March).

LAND OF UNBELIEF? The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago polled 30 countries to determine the level of belief, unbelief or doubt about God. Japan turned out to be the country with the lowest level of belief; the Philippines had the highest level. The countries with the lowest levels of belief tended to be either former socialist states or situated in northwest Europe. The countries with the highest levels of belief tended to be Catholic ones, especially in the developing world, with the U.S., Israel and Cyprus the exceptions (NORC/University of Chicago, April 18).

THEOLOGICAL WIT: Wit and humor were an integral part of Martin Luther’s theology. Writing against rationalistic, good-works-oriented religion, he declared: “As soon as reason and the Law are joined, faith immediately loses its virginity.” Luther used bathroom humor, which he directed against the devil, the pope and death. He called the pope “dearest little ass-pope.” About the devil he wrote: “If he devours me, he shall devour a laxative (God willing) which will make his bowels and anus too tight for him.” Shortly before his death Luther said to his wife Katie, “I’m like a ripe stool and the world’s like a gigantic anus, and so we’re about to let go of each other” (*Word and World*, Spring).

“Nuns have always had a different set of priorities from that of bishops. The bishops are interested in power. The nuns are interested in the powerless.”

— Catholic author Gary Wills, writing in the *New York Review of Books* in response to the Vatican’s crackdown on U.S. nuns [RNS]

“Don’t make the world worse. I know that I’m supposed to tell you to aspire to great things. But I’m going to lower the bar here: Just don’t use your prodigious talents to mess things up. Too many smart people are doing that already.”

— Charles Wheelan’s advice to college graduates [from *10½ Things No Commencement Speaker Has Ever Said*, adapted in the *Wall Street Journal*, April 27]

FANNING THE HEAT: Wind farms are supposed to be environmentally friendly, but research reported in *Nature* indicates that large wind farms actually contribute to warmer temperatures, at least at the local level. At nighttime, after the sun goes down, the earth’s temperature usually decreases. Large wind farms mix that cold air with warmer air aloft, increasing the local temperature. This could have an eventual effect on wildlife in the area and could also affect the weather regionally, since warmer air contributes to cloud formation and wind speeds. The research was done in Texas, which has four of the largest wind farms in the world. China is reportedly erecting 36 wind turbines a day (*Telegraph*, April 29).

HOT AIR: Baseball commentator Tim McCarver has been ridiculed for suggesting that global warming is to blame for an increase in the number of home runs hit in the major leagues. To a point he’s correct. Balls carry better in warm, humid air. The increase in global temperature does track with an increase in home runs. However, other factors are involved, including changes in athletic ability, batting and ball technology and pitching styles. One physicist argued that a two-degree rise in temperature could lead to a 1.75 percent increase in home-run odds. A climatologist argued that an increase in carbon emissions makes the atmosphere heavier, which should result in fewer home runs (*Washington Post* blog, April 30).

MILLENNIALS (AGES 18–24) ON CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

Believe it has **good values and principles**

76%

Believe it consistently **shows love for other people**

63%

Find it **judgmental**

62%

Feel “**antigay attitudes**” **describes it** somewhat or very well



SOURCE: Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs and the Public Religion Research Institute

William Willimon on being bishop

Sent to serve

by George Mitrovich

WIDELY PUBLISHED author and preacher—and *CENTURY* editor at large—William H. Willimon will step down this summer after eight years as bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. He will return to teaching at Duke Divinity School, where for many years he was dean of the chapel and professor of ministry. I asked him about his experience as bishop and some other topics.

As you leave the episcopacy after eight years, what do you consider your greatest achievement?

Perseverance. That's a cardinal virtue for any form of ministry, including the episcopacy—the willingness to serve where one is sent with the conviction that God is present, working through your ministry to accomplish God's purposes, even when one doesn't get observable results.

What was your greatest failure?

Well, I failed to communicate our conference's new values of accountability and growth in every level of our church. We didn't start enough new churches, and we failed to significantly increase professions of faith. I also failed to stamp out children's sermons. The list is long. Still, if someone doesn't have a long list of ministry failures, it's a sign that one has failed to comprehend the truly outrageous demands that Jesus puts upon us. For reasons known only to the Holy Spirit, God blesses some of our efforts and sometimes God doesn't.

What would you have done differently?

I wish I had moved more decisively as bishop in my first years. Then again, I seemed to have moved too fast for many of my critics. (Our church overstresses the

need for stability and continuity.) I should have found a way to activate and utilize lay leaders more effectively; most of my successful communication was among clergy. I was criticized for being too "blunt," for being too "severe" in my criticism, but I think I could have been more clear and consistent in my message. It's odd that some of my most notable inadequacies as an episcopal leader are the same as my weaknesses as a preacher.

Are the appointing powers of a bishop consistent with democratic ideals?

I love living in a democracy, but I find little support in scripture for the practice. Bishops have power to send pastors because all ministry in the name of Jesus is "sent." Ministry in any form is always God's idea before it is ours. It's too much to expect pastors willingly and eagerly to go to some of the places Jesus is trying to save. So we have bishops to remind everyone that God so loved the world (and not just me and my friends)—including the remote reaches of Alabama.

The appointive system is one of Wesleyanism's great contributions to the mission of the church—God forgive us when we bishops allow the church to degenerate into a kind of clergy club, honor seniority rather than effectiveness in clergy and fail to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Was it a mistake to guarantee church appointments to clergy?

It's a mistake to fail to hold every pastor accountable for the results of his or her ministry. Nothing in the discipline requires a bishop to overlook a pastor's incompetence or to protect clergy from the truth. God uses some clergy for the advancement of the kingdom and not others. We



discharged about 30 clergy while I was bishop—everything from early retirements to the threat of a formal complaint for ineffectiveness. Fortunately, very few of our clergy are truly, demonstrably ineffective. Sadder still than our failure to remove our few ineffective clergy is our failure to appoint effective clergy where they can best lead the mission of the church.

If you as bishop determined that following ordination a minister recanted doctrinal vows he or she had solemnly pledged to honor, would that be grounds for dismissal?

Absolutely. I'd rather remove a pastor for doctrinal sin than sexual sin. So make my day: tell me you have misgivings about the Trinity or trouble believing in the bodily resurrection and I'll help you to find less intellectually demanding work—like being a Republican candidate for president.

Given that there are 177,000 churches in the United States with fewer than 100 members, what sense does it make to strain denominational resources just to keep church doors open?

The United Methodist Church has more small-membership churches than any other denomination in the world for one reason: bishops. We are guilty of sending well-trained clergy to a congregation that has ceased to participate, in any vibrant way, in the mission of Jesus Christ. In so many ways our church sub-

George Mitrovich, a United Methodist layman, is president of the City Club of San Diego and the Denver Forum, and he chairs the Great Fenway Park Writers Series.

sidizes and props up nonviable congregations. That's sad. We closed about 15 churches per year in North Alabama. If we had a more effective bishop, that number would have been three times higher. It's more important to start new churches than to expend a huge amount of time closing nonviable churches.

What should the church say about the ever-growing economic divide in the U.S.?

I think our churches should do more to give the wealthy something good to do with their accumulated wealth. John Wesley was a master at that ministry. We also ought to be upfront about the ways in which Jesus gave the poor a privileged place in his kingdom and said that the rich (like bishops who pull down 120k a year) are in big trouble.

Where do you stand on gay rights?

We ought to zealously uphold the civil rights of all people and to eagerly recruit gay and lesbian persons to our churches. Considering all the unkind things some

in our church have said about those with their sexual orientation, evangelism of gays won't be easy. What annoys me is those who say that sexual orientation is such a huge biblical sin (it isn't) and who apparently feel no compulsion to welcome these persons into the grace-filled fellowship of United Methodism. Jesus was notorious because of the persons he received, not those he rejected.

What is your position on abortion?

It is the same as our church's position on capital punishment. Lifewatch has been a pain in the neck (and I mean that as high compliment) in helping Methodists focus on the theological dimensions of abortion.

What do you plan to say to students at Duke Divinity School?

I will tell the students that I feel a bit like Moses on Mount Nebo. I've seen a vision of a renewed and revitalized United Methodism, but I fear that I won't get to go with them into a prom-

ised land of United Methodism again vital and flourishing. Of course, that promised land may be in Africa rather than Alabama, but such are the drawbacks of following a Lord who wants the whole world and not just the U.S.A.

How do you hope you are remembered?

Alas, I can't choose the way I'll be remembered. From what I've seen, bishops make big mistakes trying to leave some enduring legacy. Here we have no abiding city (Hebrews 13:14). Our only hope, in life and in death, is that God remembers us. Like all struggling sinners, I pray that God will forgive me for the sins of commission and omission in my episcopacy such as my unfair criticism of Glen Beck, the Institute for Religion and Democracy, the governor of Alabama, contemporary Christian music, children's sermons, Joel Osteen and—wow, come to think of it, I've really got a long list of sins. If I live to be 101, maybe I'll have adequate time to repent.



CO₂ and the extinction of species

The great exhale

by Lee A. Vierling

ATMOSPHERIC carbon dioxide today registers 390 parts per million, and counting. Even in the most optimistic global scenarios, our fossil-fuel-burning ways will result within the next 100 years in a full doubling of the pre-industrial amount of atmospheric carbon dioxide—up to 560 parts per million—and beyond.

At the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bonn this month, nations will try again to come to grips with the enhanced greenhouse effect

spurred by this rise in the Molecule of the Millennium. But let's set aside for a moment the future implications of the CO₂ shift and go back 40 million years to the last time that an atmospheric shift of this magnitude took place. A look back provides a startling perspective on how different the environments of the earth have been—and how different they may become.

As far as scientists can tell through analyzing soil and sediment, the last time the planet's atmospheric CO₂ hovered

around 560 ppm was 40 to 50 million years ago. What happened next was that carbon dioxide levels were cut in half, falling from over 560 to 280 ppm. This swing took a very long time—25 million years. (Compare that to the pace of change we are on now, which forecasts CO₂ amounts doubling in 250 years.)

What caused that ancient drop in CO₂? The emergence of Mount Everest.

Lee A. Vierling studies environmental change and teaches at the University of Idaho.

At that time, the Indian subcontinent was its own island in its own sea. But as though in a fit of loneliness, the Indian plate restlessly charged northward at a steady clip of 20 centimeters per year. In the ensuing grand collision with the continent we know as Asia, the Himalayan mountains were born.

With the emergence of great mountains like the Himalayas came immense amounts of freshly exposed rock. This rock chemically breaks down when exposed to rain, snow and ice. Over time, the eons-long Himalayan weathering process created a massive drawdown of atmospheric CO₂.

CO₂ and water naturally mingle in the atmosphere to create mildly acidic precipitation, and when this precipitation falls it removes CO₂ from the air. Most of the time, the CO₂ quickly returns to the atmosphere, rapidly refreshing the cycle. But when precipitation falls on fresh rocks, like the ones in the young Himalayas, an ionic stew of dissolved solids is carried oceanward, locking the carbon atoms away as limestone rocks in the sea much the way hard water in your pipes can leave limey rings in your bathtub.

The ensuing drop in atmospheric CO₂ due in part to Himalayan chemical weathering was enormous: levels fell

from 1000 ppm, to 560 ppm, and finally to 280 ppm. That's the amount, according to studies of ice cores extracted from Antarctica and Greenland, that was present before the first chunk of fossil fuel was mined and burned.

What planetary changes were wrought by this decline in atmospheric CO₂? From a climate perspective, one of the most significant effects was the rise of the first ice age in 300 million years. As the greenhouse effect weakened with the drop in CO₂, the ever-present cyclical variations in the earth's orbit (which under higher CO₂ conditions are themselves not sufficient to trigger major climate changes) were suddenly enough to kick off a series of ice ages. The presence of the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets signifies that we are still living in that Ice Age, a rare phenomenon during the earth's 4.6 billion years.

Equally remarkable, and especially instructive for our situation, was the effect of this drop in CO₂ on plants, the organisms that depend upon CO₂ for their very livelihood. As their chief building block—atmospheric CO₂—declined, plants found themselves in a dire situation. Plants' ability to photosynthesize gradually fell to record lows. Then

something startling happened. Studies of the fossil teeth of ancient horses and camels reveal that a new kind of grass developed that used a radically new kind of photosynthesis process—one in which CO₂ values are essentially magnified within the leaf before the photosynthetic process occurs. The competitive balance was tipped far enough to allow these plants to gain a strong foothold in many of the earth's ecosystems. Today we have come to depend on several descendants of these grasses; they include corn, sorghum, sugarcane and millet.

It's humbling to consider the dramatic shifts that came from the last major change in atmospheric CO₂: both the dawn of the ice ages and the evolution of a new photosynthetic strategy that today produces a major fraction of the global food supply. When one contrasts this gradual unfolding of change over tens of millions of years with the current "global exhale" that will double CO₂ in an eyeblinkingly fast 250 years, it's clear that the environmental consequences are likely to be even more mind-bending. As we've learned through the complex interplay between CO₂ levels, orbital cycles and the earth's past climate, the future upswing in CO₂ will combine with myriad other processes to effect change.

Already, scientists have observed that the competitive balances of plants have been upended due to human-enabled invasions of exotic species and that other new biological feedbacks (such as astonishing population crashes in important pollinator species like bats and honeybees) are occurring. And ironically, while CO₂ is the very lifeblood of plants, some scientists predict that these and other stresses may interact with CO₂-driven climate change to exacerbate a mass global extinction of native plant species that is already under way. Others studying agricultural systems wonder how our powerful arsenal of scientific tools (like genetic modification) might be best, and most ethically, applied in order to address the problems. At the very least, our world is departing quickly and radically from anything that plants—or people—have ever seen.

What sort of world will we bequeath our children? We must do more than hold our breath.

Under cover

We see God in the shape
he shows to us. For some, fire.
For others, holy smoke, oil,
a running river, sheep's crook,
muscular right arm that holds
against the dark, the dread.

It is the oddity of poets
to not see the world straight on
but at some slant, under the skin,
behind the scrim—a scurry
of leaves, clouds. God speaks
his presence in the wind.

I sensed him even in the ink
warming within the pen before
these words arrived.

Luci Shaw

Evangelicals and birth control

Going Catholic?

by Amy Frykholm

AMID THE various responses to the White House mandate requiring insurance plans to cover birth control for employees—including those working at Catholic institutions—one statistic caught my eye. A Pew survey found that 56 percent of white evangelicals disagreed with the government mandate, but only 47 percent of white mainline Protestants and only 37 percent of Catholics did. Evangelicals, some suggested, appeared to be more in tune with Catholic teaching than Catholics are.

Though these figures may simply reflect evangelicals' long-standing defense of religious liberty against government intrusion, some observers, such as Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times*, have suggested that a shift is under way in evangelical views on birth control. Oppenheimer points to the evangelical Quiverfull movement, which opposes birth control and celebrates large families; the popular reality television show *19 Kids and Counting*; and figures like theologian Russell Moore at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who assails America's "contraceptive culture." Taken together, Oppenheimer argues, we can see evangelicals gradually adopting a more Catholic view of birth control.

There are two questions to consider here: whether or not a shift is taking place among evangelicals and, if it is, whether it is bringing evangelicals closer to Catholic thinking. On both issues, the answer appears to be no.

The arguments of evangelicals who reject birth control do not mirror Catholic arguments. Catholic objections to birth control are usually framed in terms of a natural law argument, which declares that it's wrong to detach sex from the possibility of procreation.

Evangelicals are more likely to frame their argument in personal terms and emphasize the importance of an individual's trust in God. In that context, birth control is portrayed as a sign of desiring to control one's destiny rather than turning one's life over to God.

That's the approach taken by Agnieszka Tennant in a 2005 piece in *Christianity Today*. She writes of her growing concern that use of birth control was creating a "hostile uterine environment" and signaled a selfish life. A few years into her marriage, she decided to abandon birth control. It should be noted here that whatever her uneasiness with birth con-

ital sex and homosexuality. Extending this concern to birth control is rarer, but it can fit into the same set of concerns.

Whatever uneasiness with birth control is voiced in some corners of evangelicalism, the issue does not appear to have much traction for most believers, male or female. A Guttmacher Institute study reports that 75 percent of evangelical women say that they use birth control, and a recent Gallup poll showed that 91 percent of evangelicals believe that hormonal and barrier methods of birth control are morally acceptable.

Jenell Paris, a cultural anthropologist at Messiah College and author of *Birth*

Though some prominent evangelicals oppose contraceptives, most evangelical women use them.

trol, her sequence of decisions—choosing to stop using birth control a few years into marriage in order potentially to conceive a child—is utterly conventional and would be similar to that of many women from an array of religious backgrounds.

Moore's attack on a "contraceptive culture" reflects another evangelical approach to the issue: a concern that contraceptives encourage sexual permissiveness. While Moore's argument mirrors Pope Paul VI's worry about birth control causing a "general lowering of moral standards," evangelicals have a long-standing and vocal disagreement with culturally permissive trends in sexuality that is largely independent of a Catholic influence. That perspective surfaces in the way evangelicals tend to oppose sex education, abortion, premar-

Control for Christians: Making Wise Choices, says that arguments about "trusting God with your womb" can be persuasive for evangelical women but that most don't see trusting God and using technology as mutually exclusive. "Evangelical women work; their families rely on their incomes. They see that birth control is good for marriages and good for families."

To understand current evangelical thinking on birth control, it would be crucial to hear more from evangelical women themselves. It's revealing that when Oppenheimer wanted to get a better understanding of evangelicals' views on the topic, he called up several megachurch preachers—all of them men. Granted, evangelicalism by its nature has no official spokesperson, but on this issue it seems particularly misguided to seek the views only of prominent male preachers. 

The buzz of life

by Terra Brockman

YOUR BEES ARE in the mail,” read the postcard on my sister’s kitchen table.

It was not an April Fool’s prank but a simple statement of fact. In a day or two the local post office would call and ask, with a slight sense of urgency, for someone to please come pick up the wood and wire box containing two pounds of honeybees.

It was appropriate that the bees were coming now, during the spring week of maximal buzz. Following weeks of unseasonably warm weather, the flowers were out in full force—as were their pollinators. The flowering crabapple in my yard was a pulsating mass of blossoms and bees, from tiny native flies, moths, orchard mason bees and leafcutter bees to heavy bumblebees, the most improbable of all flighted creatures. They launch themselves into the air like overweight cargo planes, managing to land on the lip of a petal and grab on with their six strong legs while their vibrations loosen tightly held pollen grains.

I was happy to see all the native pollinators, but sorry there were only one or two honeybees. Sorry, but not surprised, since it is difficult for a colony to remain strong enough to survive the winter after being assaulted all season by the insecticides drenching lawns and fields all around us. The very word tells you what these chemicals do—kill insects—and bees are insects. This means that most beekeepers, including my sister, can no longer overwinter their hives but need to order new package bees each spring. Someday, some say, a bee in farm country will be as rare a sight as a team of horses.

Thanks to that buzzing double shoebox we got from the post office, and a

small wire cage hanging inside it, we hope that bees will be a ubiquitous sight on our farm this season. That small wire cage houses the key to all our hopes, the queen. Her box has a bee-size opening plugged with a piece of candy, which gradually dissolves under the labor of many tiny tongues. By the time the last lick liberates the queen, the whole colony will have been housed in the hive box under the locust tree on my sister Teresa’s organic fruit and herb farm.

I was a teenage beekeeper, but these days it is Teresa who keeps bees to pollinate her 60-some varieties of organic fruits, from March plum blossoms to April peach, cherry, apricot and strawberry blossoms, to the later raspberry,



go out to tend the hives in the mid to late morning, when most of the bees were out foraging. I remember the humid morning air, the rank smell of the weeds that I tramped down near the hive, the beads of sweat escaping from the band of my hat and slipping into my eyes. I especially remember the moment of inserting the hive tool under the hive cover.

There is something about prying open the cover of a hive that is as exciting as Indiana Jones entering an Egyptian tomb. Opening the hive opens the senses. You have to break the sticky propolis that the bees make from tree resins and saps and then use to seal the hive. That first scent, as you break the seal, is

Without bees there is no pollination and without pollination there is no fruit.

blueberry, currant, apple and pear blossoms. Pollination by insects is called *entomophily*, or “insect-loving,” which is fitting as the insects are making it possible for the plants to have sex and, quite literally, bear fruit.

Without pollination, there would be no fruit, nor the hundreds of vegetables that are botanic fruits, coming from the flowers of tomatoes, squash, eggplants, peppers, beans, peas and many more. Without pollinators, the plants would grow but never produce edible fruit crops, and our world would quickly become a barren place.

I remember my early beekeeping days with hallucinatory clarity. I would

enlivening and tangy and creates a heightened awareness. Smelling the bees’ glue, beeswax, musky brood, sweet and spicy honey, you inhale all the distilled essences of summer.

The buzz of hundreds of thousands of bees adds to the otherworldly feel by creating an intense concentration that is calming. You lift off the cover and set it gently next to the hive, every movement slow and deliberate, a sort of bee tai chi. You listen to the calm buzzing of bees at work, staying alert for the high-pitched warning whine of an angry bee about to launch a suicide attack. I always feel worse for the bee than for myself when I get a bee sting, knowing that the worker



bee has disemboweled herself as she pulls away from my stung flesh.

When I kept bees in the early 1970s it was a simple matter of giving them enough hive space to raise brood and enough space to store honey. That, and the sun and rain and a wide array of blooming plants—from maple, elm and willow in April to goldenrod and aster in October—were all they needed. I never had to check for varroa mites, tracheal mites, nosema or foul brood. I never had to deal with dive-bombing planes spraying pesticides. The bees were healthy, and the ecosystem they supported and were supported by was relatively healthy.

All that has changed. When I moved back to central Illinois ten years ago and put a hive in the yard outside my house, it seemed fine through the summer and into the fall. I left the bees with plenty of honey to last the winter, and then on the first warm spring day I suited up to check on them. I put on my overalls, veil and gloves and lit the smoker. But as I approached the hive, I heard not a sound. I took out my hive tool and pried up the cover. There was no greeting, no buzzing, no breathing.

As I investigated further, lifting off the honey super and looking down into the brood chamber, what came to mind was the video footage of the scene after the agrochemical factory explosion in Bhopal, India. Thousands upon thousands of bee bodies were piled up between the frames—frames that should have contained eggs, larvae, brood in all stages of development, all gearing up for the first big gathering of pollen and nectar. Instead there was the silence of death. I felt terrible—and wondered what I had done wrong, thinking some negligence on my part had led to this tragedy. But when

I asked Teresa about it, she said the same thing had happened to her hives—and to everyone else's around us.

Thirty years earlier, they too had done very little with their hives and never had a colony die. Researchers call bees “the canary in the coal mine”—if they cannot live, soon we will not live.

A quote attributed to Albert Einstein has been popping up on the Internet: “If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, man would have only four years of life

beekeeping days invades my brain. I feel my breathing and my heartbeat slow as my eyes and ears become more keen. A happy low hum rises up and a smile of relief floods my face. My eyes meet Teresa's over the hive and I read the same relief there.

We lift off the almost-empty honey supers and look down into the brood chamber. There we slowly pry up each frame, Teresa with her hive tool on one side of it and me with mine on the other. Then she grasps it, turns it on its side and examines the broad surface of the comb,

Researchers call bees “the canary in the coal mine”—if they cannot live, soon we will not live.

left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more people.” It turns out that Einstein didn't say this, but the viral ubiquity of the sentiment says plenty.

A few weeks after the two pounds of bees and their queen were installed in their new home under the locust tree, Teresa and I choose a bright sunny day to check on them. With insecticides used all around us, and bees foraging up to five miles from the hive, we know we can't protect them fully and must hope for the best.

We don our white coveralls, elbow-length canvas gloves, and veils that fit over our straw hats. On a sunny morning, the bees are in a good mood, focused on their foraging and not on the curious humans. We crack open the hive, and that same intoxicating aroma from my early

looking for the queen and seeing what is in the brood cells.

Although we did not find the queen that day, we saw evidence of her work. Some frames were full of wax cells, each with a tiny white egg deposited in the bottom, lying there like a pearly grain of rice. Others frames were full of larva, some tiny, others fat and shiny, nearly bursting out of their cell. On other frames we saw the capped pupal stage. And we watched a new bee, soft and fuzzy, with crinkled-up antennae, emerge from a cell.

CC

Terra Brockman is the author of *The Seasons on Henry's Farm (Agate Surrey)* and the founder of the Land Connection. She farms with her sister Teresa, brother Henry and other family members in the Mackinaw River Valley of central Illinois.

Methodists maintain gay policies

Despite emotional protests and fierce lobbying from gay rights groups, United Methodists voted to maintain their denomination's stance that homosexual acts are "incompatible with Christian teaching"—an expected outcome as the denomination becomes increasingly international in membership.

Two "agree-to-disagree" proposals were soundly defeated in separate votes by the nearly 1,000 delegates gathered in Tampa, Florida, for the United Methodist Church's ten-day General Conference that ended May 4.

One proposal would have replaced the "incompatible" phrase in the Book of Discipline, which contains the denomination's laws and doctrines. Both proposals sought to soften the doctrine by adding statements about homosexuality that were more ambiguous.

While other mainline churches hold their legislative conventions at two- or three-year intervals, the UMC's General Conference convenes every four years. United Methodist numbers are shrinking in the U.S. but growing in Africa and Asia, shifting the balance of power to overseas conservatives. The number of African delegates in Tampa was up 32 percent over the 2008 meeting.

The denomination's diversity was on display May 3 as gays and lesbians pleaded for recognition of their "sacred worth" and an African delegate, speaking through an interpreter, compared homosexuality to bestiality. Proposals defeated that day would have acknowledged that diversity, but, some conservatives argued, at the cost of muddying traditional doctrines.

One proposal would have changed the Book of Discipline to say that gays and lesbians [are] "people of sacred

worth" and that church members differ about "whether homosexual practices [are] contrary to the will of God." Adam Hamilton, a megachurch pastor in Leawood, Kansas, argued that the proposal would "acknowledge our disagreement on a huge issue that is separating churches in North America today." That proposal was defeated by a 54 percent majority.

"I see no reason why we should state [in the Book of Discipline] that we disagree," said Maxie Dunnam, former president of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. "We disagree on almost every issue we consider."

The delegates defeated another compromise proposal by an even wider margin: 61 to 39 percent. The resolution would have acknowledged a "limited

understanding" of human sexuality and called on the church to "refrain from judgment regarding homosexual persons and practices until the Spirit leads us to new insight."

Steve Wendy of Texas argued that the compromise would cause confusion and lead the church to "stumble" in its Christian witness. "If you look at our largest congregations and crunch the numbers, they are all reaching young adults successfully," Wendy said. "And, overwhelmingly, they teach and proclaim God's truth without compromise."

But Jennifer Ihlo, a lay delegate from the Baltimore/Washington Conference, argued in favor of the compromise. "I want to be clear that this is not an abstract issue. This is about people who are being harmed by the church and by



DISAPPOINTMENT: Delegate Jo Ann Carlotto (second from left) of the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church wipes her eyes with a rainbow stole after delegates voted to maintain the denomination's stance on homosexuality during the 2012 General Conference in Tampa, Florida.

the use of the ‘incompatibility’ language,” Ihlo said. “I am a lesbian and a child of God, and I strongly urge the body to support this compromise language so that gay youth... will recognize that the church loves them and God loves them and the violence and pain and suicide will stop.”

After the proposals were defeated, gay rights activists flooded the assembly floor and disrupted the session by singing the hymn “What Does the Lord Require of You?” Indiana Bishop Michael Coyner, chair of the morning session, told the protesters, “I think you’re actually hurting your point.” When the protesters refused to stop singing, Coyner closed the session and sent the delegates to an early lunch.

According to several sources, conference planners, evangelical leaders and gay and lesbian advocates then conferred and determined that there was little use in holding additional contentious debates on homosexuality. Proposals to ordain gay clergy and bless same-sex unions held little chance of passing, the parties agreed, and so were pushed to the back of the agenda, essentially assuring that they would not be debated.

“Leaders of the demonstration were told that the legislation was postponed to avoid more harm to LGBT people and their supporters,” the Love Your Neighbor Coalition said in a statement. “The United Methodist Church had an opportunity to offer love, grace, and hope,” the coalition said. “Sadly, we did not take that opportunity.”

In other matters:

- Delegates voted May 1 to end guaranteed clergy appointments. The job security measures date back to the 1950s, when they were instituted to protect ministers from arbitrary abuse or discrimination, supporters say. Critics say those original goals have helped mediocre clergy retain their posts.

- Rejected by delegates was a proposal for “setting aside” a bishop to serve as a full-time president of the Council of Bishops. At present, men and women elected to that position are expected to continue their duties as regional bishops.

- The most comprehensive goal facing

delegates was to restructure church agencies and downsize their boards. A committee adjourned the evening of April 28 without recommending one of two plans officially submitted or another unofficial plan. Many observers called the committee proceedings a “debacle,” according to United Methodist News Service. “This was money wasted, time wasted; this is not the will of God,” said Dale M. Witherspoon, a delegate from northern California.

An 80-page restructuring plan was adopted May 2, and the nine-member Judicial Council—the church’s highest court—was asked routinely to rule on its constitutionality. At 4:30 p.m. on the gathering’s last day, the Judicial Council “dropped a bombshell that rocked the assembly to its core,” according to the news service. The delegates plus 4,000 visitors and staff were informed that the council ruled unanimously that the plan was unconstitutional, in part because it intrudes “into the constitutional authority of the Council of Bishops for general oversight of the denomination.” —RNS

UMC rejects call to divest from firms selling to Israel

At their General Conference, United Methodists twice rejected resolutions that called for the denomination to divest from companies accused of contributing to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. About two-thirds of the nearly 1,000 delegates rejected the calls for divestment. The UMC rejected similar resolutions at its previous General Conference in 2008.

“Of course we care about the Palestinians and what they’ve been through,” Bob Long, a pastor-delegate from Oklahoma, said during the May 2 debate at the Tampa convention. “But we also care about the Israelis and what they’ve been through.” Don House, a lay delegate from Texas, warned the UMC against setting an unwelcome precedent. “We’d be targeting the companies that make the products, instead of the people who use the products,” he said.

This year, high-profile activists, such



RNS / MIKE DUROSE / UNITED METHODIST NEWS SERVICE

PAN-METHODIST PACT: United Methodists have agreed to share sacraments and affirm each other’s clergy with five historically black denominations after more than a decade of discussions. The full-communion agreement was overwhelmingly approved April 30 at the UMC General Conference. Shown celebrating the pact (from left) are Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader, United Methodist Church; Bishop Thomas Hoyt Jr., Christian Methodist Episcopal Church; pastor W. Robert Johnson III, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and Bishop John F. White, African Methodist Episcopal Church.

as Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, had lobbied in favor of divestment. "Such action made an enormous difference in apartheid South Africa," the Nobel Peace Prize laureate said in the *Tampa Bay Times*. "It can make an enormous difference in creating a future of justice and equality for Palestinians and Jews in the Holy Land."

But many American Jews had strongly opposed the divestment resolutions, calling them unfair and politically naive. "A one-sided approach damages the relationship between Jews and Christians that has been nurtured for decades," about 1,200 North American rabbis wrote in an open letter. "It promotes a lopsided assessment of the causes of and solutions to the conflict, disregarding the complex history and geopolitics. Furthermore, it shamefully paints Israel as a pariah nation, solely responsible for frustrating peace."

One of the rejected resolutions called out heavy machinery manufacturer Caterpillar Inc., Motorola Solutions and Hewlett-Packard, which have been accused of contributing to, and even profiting from, the destruction of Palestinian homes and construction of Israeli settlements.

Earlier on May 2, UMC delegates did approve, by a 60–40 vote, a resolution voicing opposition to Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories.

—Daniel Burke, RNS

Praying for God to hurt someone is not illegal, judge rules

Is it OK to ask God to do harm to another person? The theology of such "imprecatory prayer" may be a matter of debate, but a Dallas judge has ruled that it is legal, at least as long as no one is actually threatened or harmed.

District Court Judge Martin Hoffman dismissed a lawsuit brought by Mikey Weinstein against a former U.S. Navy chaplain who he said used "curse" prayers like those in Psalm 109 to incite others to harm Weinstein, a Jewish agnostic and founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, and his family.

Hoffman said there was no evidence that the prayers by Gordon Klingenschmitt, who had been endorsed for the navy chaplaincy by the Dallas-based Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches, were connected to threats made against Weinstein and his family or damage done to his property. The lawsuit said Klingenschmitt posted a prayer on his website urging followers to pray for the downfall of MRFF.

"I praise God for religious freedom because the judge declared it's OK to pray imprecatory prayers and quote

Psalm 109," Klingenschmitt said after the ruling, according to the April 2 *Dallas Morning News*.

Psalm 109, which is 31 verses long, calls for the death of an opponent and curses on his widow and children, among other things.

Hoffman's ruling did not actually turn on constitutional questions as much as it did on Weinstein's claims that the prayers incited the threats and vandalism.

Weinstein, a former air force lawyer who started the foundation to battle what he sees as undue religious influence in the armed forces, said April 6 that "a very aggressive appeal is highly likely."

He said as a result of his activism he has received numerous death threats and had swastikas painted on his house, his windows shot out and animal carcasses left on his doorstep.

"We are disappointed in the ruling because we believe the judge made a mistake in not understanding that imprecatory prayers are code words for trolling for assassins for the Weinstein family," Weinstein said. "I don't think the judge understood that these are not regular prayers," he added, comparing imprecatory prayer to a radical Islamic fatwa.

Imprecatory prayers have a long if complicated history in religious traditions. But this type of prayer, and Psalm 109 in particular, has become a hot topic since President Obama's election as a number of religious conservatives have invoked it against him.

In the most recent case, the speaker of the House of Representatives in Kansas, Mike O'Neal, sparked an outcry in January when he sent Psalm 109 to Republican colleagues, writing, "At last—I can honestly voice a biblical prayer for our president!"

"Thankfully, the district court recognized that if people are forced to stop offering imprecatory prayers, half the churches, synagogues and mosques in this country will have to be shut down," said John W. Whitehead, president of the Rutherford Institute, a legal advocacy group that helped defend the Chaplaincy of Full Gospel Churches. —RNS

ELCA seminary and Lenoir-Rhyne will merge

ALTHOUGH THEY will stay on their campuses 140 miles apart, Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina, and Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, will merge July 1.

At a March 26 signing ceremony, Lenoir-Rhyne President Wayne B. Powell called the merger a "win-win" for the two schools, both of them affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Lenoir-Rhyne is establishing a school of theology which will include the seminary as part of a larger university system, officials said.

The LTSS this year has 145 students, of which 117 are in the M.Div. program, according to the ELCA News Service. Ginger Barfield, the seminary's academic dean, said the agreement allows the school to maintain its campus in Columbia, its location since 1911. Lenoir-Rhyne University "provides a natural flow of potential to the seminary," she said.

ELCA presiding bishop Mark S. Hanson said: "Both institutions will be enriched with a greater diversity and an increased capacity to serve both church and society."

Opposition to gay marriage lower in 2012 campaign

Opposition to gay marriage is significantly lower in 2012 compared to the previous two presidential campaigns, a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press shows.

For the first time, the level of strong support for gay marriage is equal to the level of strong opposition, researchers report. In the April 4–15 survey, 22 percent of Americans say they strongly favor permitting legal marriage for gays and lesbians; an identical percentage said they strongly oppose it. In 2008, strong opposition was twice as high as support—30 percent versus 14 percent.

In 2004, when a host of antigay marriage ballot measures helped propel social conservatives to the polls, opposi-

tion was more than three times higher than support, 36 percent to 11 percent.

In comparison to the changes in views on gay marriage, not much has changed concerning support for legal abortion. In 2009, fewer than 50 percent of Americans favored legal abortion, but that support rebounded to more than half of the U.S. population and has generally followed trends dating to 1995.

This time around, as in recent election cycles, voters say social issues—such as gay marriage and abortion—are not as important as the economy and jobs. While more than 80 percent of Americans cite the economy and jobs as top voting issues, far fewer rated abortion (39 percent) and gay marriage (28 percent) as very important.

The survey on gay marriage was based on interviews with 1,514 U.S. adults and had a margin of error of plus or minus 2.9 percentage points. —RNS

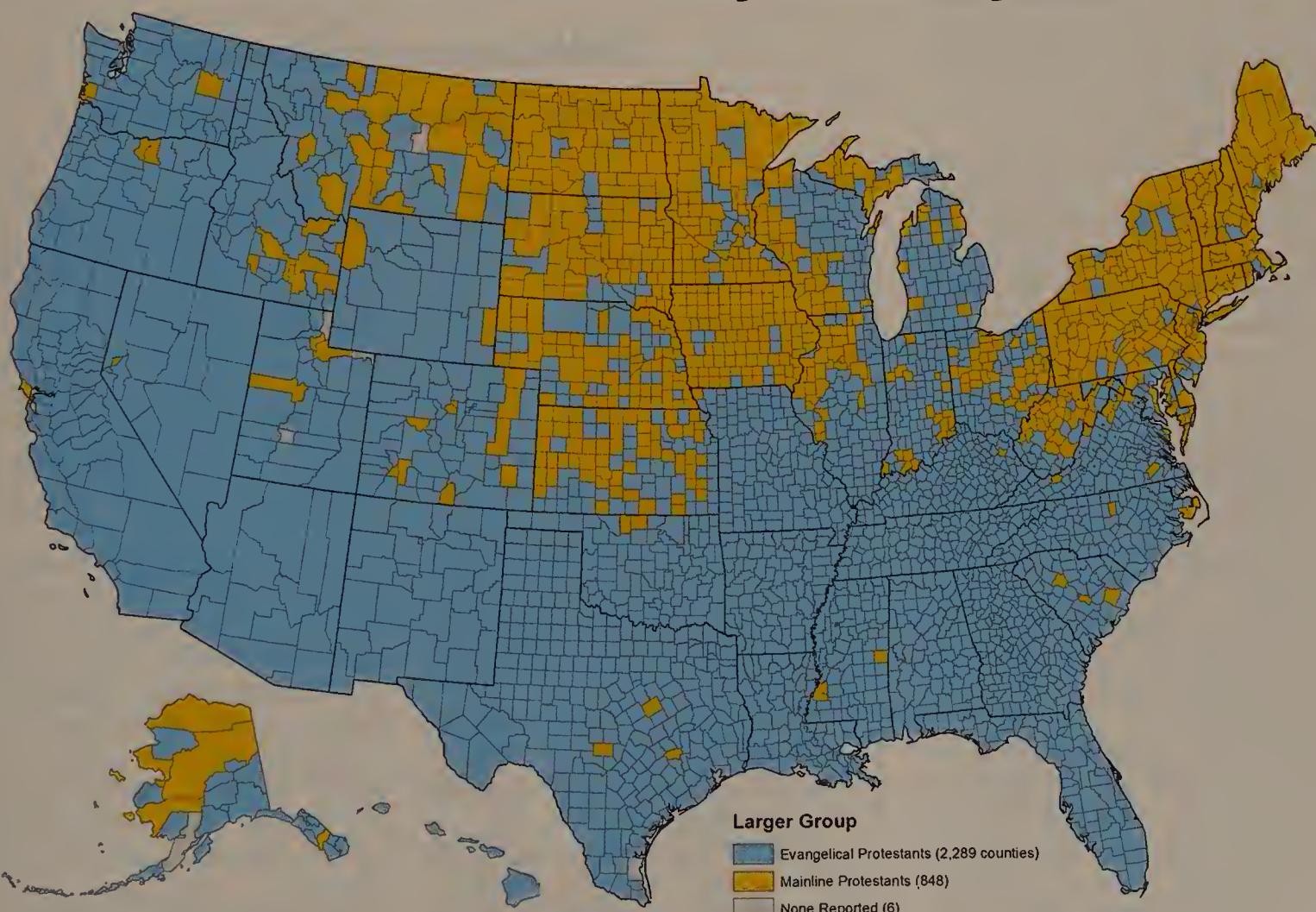
White House releases faith-based guidelines

A new White House report that offers guidance on public-private partnerships between the government and faith-based groups leaves critical questions unanswered and does not resolve the issue of religious groups' ability to discriminate in hiring and firing, two church-state experts have said.

The 50-page report, issued April 28, comes 18 months after President Obama issued an executive order calling for more transparency as faith-based groups work with the government to meet social needs. The report breaks little new ground but reaffirms that:

- A faith-based organization can provide federally funded social services without removing religious art,

Census: mainline and evangelical strongholds



Mainline Protestants (yellow) outnumber members of evangelical and independent (blue) churches only in the Northeast and Upper Plains states, according to data recently released by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies. Relying on self-reported data from 153 participating bodies, researchers determine which is the larger group in each county.

scriptures and symbols from its facilities.

- Explicitly religious activities can't be supported by federal funds but are permitted if they are funded privately and occur at a separate time and location from programs that receive government money.

- Beneficiaries who object to the religious character of a provider must be referred promptly to an alternative.

Joshua DuBois, director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, called the guidance "an important step" in implementing the recommendations from a blue-ribbon advisory board. "A diverse group of faith and nonprofit leaders proposed ways to strengthen the government's relationship with faith-based organizations in a manner that protects religious liberty and the separation of church and state, and we are glad to move these recommendations forward," he said.

The report includes detailed examples of how to separate federally funded programs from privately funded religious activities, such as in using distinct web pages and reporting travel and use of electronic equipment.

Rabbi David Saperstein, who directs the Washington office of the Union for Reform Judaism and served on the advisory council, said the new guidance is "a great step forward," but he and others remain unsatisfied with the administration's apparent silence on addressing the ability of federally funded organizations to discriminate on the basis of religion when hiring or firing staff.

The White House has previously said the issue would be handled on a case-by-case basis and has resisted finalizing any formal policy. "We do hope that the president will move expeditiously to ensure that no one is discriminated against when it comes to hiring with tax dollars," Saperstein said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, also welcomed the report's safeguards but said loopholes remain. "This guidance makes some significant improvements to the Bush faith-based initiative, but it falls far short of what it ought to do," said Lynn, who served on a reform task force for DuBois's office.

Lynn said a fundamentalist Christian church can still run a publicly funded social service program and hang out a sign that says, "Government job opening: No Catholics, Jews, Muslims or Atheists need apply."

The report includes a true-or-false questionnaire to train individuals working most closely with programs at the intersection of government and religion. Among its statements:

- "Recipients of federal funds, including state and local governments, cannot discriminate in the provision of program services on the basis of religion." (True.)

- "There is no money set aside by the federal government for faith-based organizations to receive a designated portion of awards in federal social services." (True.)

- "Federal funds can be used to buy religious materials as long as the materials are used in a social service program serving the needy." (False.) —Adelle M. Banks, RNS

Israel's Conservative wing OKs gay and lesbian rabbis

In a landmark decision, the Masorti Movement, the Israeli branch of Conservative Judaism, announced that its rabbinical school will begin to accept gay and lesbian candidates for ordination. Board members of the Schechter Rabbinical Seminary in Jerusalem voted April 19 to enroll gay and lesbian students starting in September.

The decision follows years of disagreement between leaders of Conservative Judaism in the U.S., which permits openly gay and lesbian rabbis, and Masorti leaders in Israel, who have long resisted demands to be more inclusive.

The disagreement came to a head about two years ago, when some gay and straight rabbinical students from two U.S.-based seminaries began to refuse to study

Religious websites are the most attacked by hackers

ONLINE RELIGION may be good for your soul but dangerous for your computer, according to a new report.

The study by Symantec, a company that sells computer-security software, finds websites devoted to religion or other ideologies to be the ones most targeted by malicious hackers.

Infected religious websites averaged 115 threats, most commonly fake antivirus software, reported Symantec. That was three times the rate of hosting and personal hosted websites and four-and-one-half times that of pornographic sites.

The safest places for web surfing are sites about sports (average 13 threats per infected site), automotive (11) and shopping (9).

Symantec says it blocked over 5.5 billion malware (malicious software) attacks in 2011, an 81 percent increase over 2010. An average of 82 targeted attacks takes place each day, and you are

more likely to be infected by malware placed on a legitimate website than one created by a hacker, the report says.

Mobile phones are becoming increasingly susceptible to malware attacks, with smart phone sales projected to reach 645 million in 2012. The report said 232 million identities were stolen in 2011. The most frequent cause of data breaches was not online but the theft or loss of a computer.

Macs are not immune from attack, and spammers are starting to use Quick Response, or QR, codes to trick users into installing Trojans—benign programs that conceal another malicious program—onto their Android phones.

The report advises computer users to use up-to-date security programs and become educated about hacker tricks like getting them to believe that their computer is infected and can be fixed with an automatic download or offering "free" or pirated versions of computer programs. —Bob Allen, ABP

at Schechter during their mandatory year of study in Israel. While more liberal than the Orthodox stream of Judaism, the Masorti Movement has been more traditionalist than its U.S. counterpart.

A Schechter statement said its board made its decision following a “long process” of deliberation. “The Schechter Rabbinical Seminary views the serious process leading to this decision as an example of confronting social dilemmas within the framework of tradition and halachah [Jewish law],” said Rabbi Hanan Alexander, chairman of the seminary’s board. “This decision highlights the institution’s commitment to uphold halachah in a pluralist and changing world.” —RNS

Are Americans in Rome behind crackdown on nuns?

When the Vatican announced a doctrinal crackdown on the leadership organization representing most of the 57,000 nuns in the U.S., the sisters said they were “stunned” by the move. Many American Catholics, meanwhile, were angry at what they saw as Rome bullying women whose lives of service have endeared them to the public.

Vatican watchers also were perplexed since a broader, parallel investigation of women’s religious orders in the U.S. was resolved amicably after an initial clash. That seemed to augur a more diplomatic approach by the Vatican to concerns that American nuns were not sufficiently orthodox.

Now it turns out that conservative American churchmen living in Rome—including disgraced former Boston Cardinal Bernard Law—were key players in pushing the hostile takeover of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR, which they have long viewed with suspicion for emphasizing social justice work over loyalty to the hierarchy and issues like abortion and gay marriage.

Vatican observers in Rome and church sources in the U.S. say Law was “the person in Rome most forcefully supporting” the LCWR investigation, as Rome corre-

spondent Robert Mickens wrote in the *Tablet*, a London-based Catholic weekly. Law was the “prime instigator,” in the words of one U.S. churchman, of the investigation that began in 2009 and ended in 2011. The actual crackdown was launched just last month.

Law was joined by a former archbishop of St. Louis, Cardinal Raymond Burke, who was named to a top Vatican judicial post in 2008—a move that was seen as a case of Burke’s being “kicked upstairs” because his hardline views made him so controversial in the U.S. Also reportedly backing the probe was Cardinal James Stafford, a former Denver archbishop who has held jobs in the Roman curia since 1996.

The investigation itself was conducted by Cardinal William Levada, a former archbishop of San Francisco who succeeded Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican’s powerful doctrinal watchdog, when Ratzinger was elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005.

The fact that prelates like Burke and Law, who was given a Roman refuge in 2002 after the sexual abuse scandal exploded in Boston, played such a key role in the investigation of the American women has been like salt in the wound for those who support the nuns.

“American Catholics have not forgotten how long it took bishops to wake up to the sexual abuse crisis they created. And now they see that the Vatican took just three years to determine that it had no other option but to put 80 percent of U.S. nuns—whose average age is 74—into receivership, an effort led in part by Cardinal Bernard Law,” Grant Gallico, an associate editor of *Commonweal*, a liberal Catholic periodical, wrote on the magazine’s blog. “That decision has unified a good deal of Catholics all right—against Rome,” Gallico concluded.

John Allen, Vatican expert for the *National Catholic Reporter*, reported that a senior Vatican diplomat warned his colleagues earlier this year that launching a crackdown from Rome now would play into the “war on women” theme that has been associated with the American hierarchy’s campaign against the Obama administration’s contraception coverage mandate.

The response from officials in Levada’s office, Allen wrote, was that such concerns were “exaggerated.” —David Gibson, RNS

People

■ **Michael Kinnamon**, who resigned for health reasons last year as general secretary of the National Council of Churches, announced that he has accepted a three-year visiting professorship at Seattle University. His cardiologist had urged the former seminary professor to leave the stressful demands of the NCC post. “I am feeling fine,” he said four months later, thanking people for notes and prayers they sent. Kinnamon will teach in his specialty—ecumenical and interreligious relations—at the Jesuit university’s School of Theology and Religious Studies.

■ The boards of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary in Chicago and Bexley Hall in Columbus, Ohio, voted to form a federation of the two Episcopal schools and elected **Roger Albert Ferlo** as its first president, effective July 1. Ferlo is associate dean and director of Virginia Theological Seminary’s Institute of Christian Formation and Leadership. With existing ties to other seminaries, Seabury and Bexley will offer graduate-level education and an array of nondegree programs for church leaders.

■ **Carol E. Lynch** has been installed as president of the 187-year-old Lancaster Theological Seminary. Though the Pennsylvania seminary is related to the United Church of Christ, Lynch is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Lynch succeeds Riess Potterveld, who resigned in September to head the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. Lynch previously was assistant executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for seminaries in North America. She has a doctorate in Christian ethics and sociology of religion from Emory University in Atlanta and has researched factors that influence teens’ Christian commitment.

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, June 3

Isaiah 6:1–8; Romans 8:12–17; John 3:1–17

SHORTLY AFTER my daughter was born last summer, a friend gave my wife and me a bit of unsolicited wisdom: “God gives us children to remind us that we are not in control.” Sage advice, to be sure. But, unlike most advice that new parents receive, this adage was accompanied not with a sentimental smile but with an off-putting laugh—the kind of chuckle usually reserved for people who have chosen to learn something the hard way.

We soon found out why. The arrival of our firstborn child brought amazing experiences of delight and love into our home. But our daughter’s arrival also put life into disarray. We quickly learned that our daughter did not share her parents’ priorities—or our desire for full nights of sleep. There was a stretch last fall when someone in our house was awake every hour of the day. In those weeks, and in moments of exhaustion since then, my wife and I have begun to ask each other the same question, often with a tired smile on our faces: “Is this really happening?”

There have been glimpses of our pre-parent days in the midst of the changes: an occasional phone call from a friend that lasts late into the night, or the rare days in which the sound of an alarm clock and not our daughter stirs us from sleep. For the most part, however, the last year has been taken up with learning how to live as a person who has been given a good gift—but also a gift that has destabilized most of what ordered life a year ago.

We have found in this tumultuous season of life something that God’s people often recognize in such times: God’s grace works with a peculiar power through life’s disorienting moments. Sometimes the disorientation itself is an act of God’s mercy and grace.

These Trinity Sunday texts show God moving graciously—and persistently—toward his people while they struggle to stay on their feet. In Isaiah 6, the tribe of Judah is approaching a political and military disaster, and in the face of the impending crisis God sees fit to commission a new prophet and promise his people a future through a holy seed. In Romans 8, Paul encourages believers by teaching them that the Holy Spirit has entered into their lives and brought them out of slavery to sin and into a new way of living—one marked by Spirit-empowered freedom to love and obey the Lord. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit brings about a new birth in men and women by revealing the identity of the Son, and that the Father’s love for the cosmos (nothing less!) is the catalyst for all the saving acts of God.

The well-known encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus captures the grace that can accompany disorientation. John 3:16 records a classic summary of the Good News, one that plays an important role in evangelism, but the conversation that leads up to it is intentionally puzzling. Jesus comes across as purposefully elusive: he switches subjects quickly. He plays

with words. The Pharisee had come with talking points, but they are quickly thrown out as Jesus leads him into unexpected topics. Nicodemus strives to keep up but soon surrenders. The dialogue becomes a monologue. Jesus is not trying to accommodate Nicodemus; he is trying to unsettle him.

And Jesus succeeds. Before he knows it, Nicodemus—the teacher—takes the place of the student; the examiner becomes the examined.

Jesus’ words take aim at Nicodemus’s place in God’s kingdom. He wants Nicodemus to give up the security that was his by birth: being born of a Jewish mother offers no privilege in the kingdom that Jesus announces. Water and Spirit now serve as the birthmarks of those who belong to this family. While he is calling him to be born again, Jesus is also calling Nicodemus to risk his life. This Pharisee is, after all, a leader of those who are seeking Jesus’ life. When he says, “You must be born again,” Jesus calls one of his antagonists to cross over from being a ruler of the Jews to being a member of the persecuted minority that orders its life by the belief that God’s love for the world shows itself in the life, death and resurrection of his son. Jesus uses the plural you (“y’all”), and thus makes his appeal not only to Nicodemus but to all the men and women he represents.

Nicodemus must have been knocked off his balance by Jesus’ words. Both of his replies to Jesus express the heart of a man straining to keep up: “How can these things be?” But his disorientation is also the beginning of his conversion—one that eventually leads Nicodemus to speak out for Jesus among his peers (John 7) and to minister to Jesus at the tomb (John 19). Nicodemus does not know it at the time, but as he stumbles through this conversation, he is being reoriented and taking the first steps down the path of abundant life.

In his theology of pastoral ministry, Will Willimon describes evangelism as “an assault, a rearrangement, a reconfiguration, a re-creation of a world.” In that way of thinking about an encounter with the Good News, our ability to recognize God’s grace comes at precisely the moment that God begins disrupting a whole way of life. Jesus is after such disruption and the reorientation it leads to. He wants Nicodemus—and us—to leave behind one set of bearings and to take on an entirely new set. The father’s love calls for it. The Spirit makes surrender to this new way of life possible.

How do we respond to the interruptions that God places in our lives? Do we resist all change and try desperately to retain the status quo? Or do we allow his gifts to reorient us?

Perhaps in moments of weariness we may join with Nicodemus—or a tired new dad—and ask, “How can this be?” When we find such words on our lips, perhaps we might pause to reflect on God’s presence in our lives. It would fit the character of our triune God to reveal himself at precisely the times in which we are keenly aware of our lack of control—even when such moments occur during sleepless nights spent caring for ones we love.

Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, June 10

Mark 3:20–35

I WORSHIP in a congregation whose members sometimes hesitate before responding to scripture readings with “Thanks be to God!” On one Sunday, after hearing Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats and the strong words of warning at the end of that parable, they were so restrained that the liturgist looked up from his Bible and remarked, “You’re not so sure about that, are you?” It was a penetrating observation. Judgment, warning and division often make us stammer out our thanks. This narrative from Mark contains all three of those elements. Yet its words also call for our thankful response.

The religious leaders of Jerusalem traveled to Galilee to observe Jesus at work but wrongly identified the Messiah as a man possessed by a demon. They were not the only ones: Jesus’ family approached him as if he were insane, which was likely a way of charging him with demonic possession. It is hard to believe that people so learned and so close to Jesus could be so mistaken about who he was. Jesus warned religious leaders that they were perilously close to committing an eternal sin by rejecting the one who sets them free. Then he broke with his family—disregarding his mother—and established a new family composed of those who sit at his feet and do the will of God.

Several strands of the story rise to the surface. Consider the confrontation between Jesus and his accusers. Gentleness and subtlety are not hallmarks of Jesus’ teaching in this passage. Jesus presents himself as a thief who has entered into the strong man’s house—Satan’s house—and tied him up. Now Jesus is moving through the house plundering what was once Satan’s, taking back the lives of men and women that seemed consigned to suffering.

His grace still works this way. William, a man whose life had been ravaged by a seven-year addiction to cocaine, had lost everything that was dear to him. Then Jesus found him in a homeless shelter. When I met him William was what I, as a new chaplain, least expected: someone who wanted to turn every aspect of his life over to Jesus as quickly as possible. “I have given my life to Lord Jesus and been forgiven, now I’m ready,” he announced. “How do I call my daughter and ask her to forgive me? How should I get in touch with my mother and tell her I am sorry for stealing from her?” I am not sure how insightful my responses were, but I was confident that I was to respond, “Thanks be to God!”

We are set free by Jesus for life with him. Jesus insists that belonging to his family requires obedience. Here this means

assuming the posture and practices of a disciple. Catholic priest and theologian Gerhard Lohfink explains that in Mark’s Gospel, people who do God’s will are those who believe the message of Jesus and let themselves be caught up in the restoration of God’s kingdom. We might be tempted to adopt a vague notion of “faith” as the only criterion for inclusion in this family, but Jesus’ teaching will not allow us to separate faith from faithfulness or discipleship from submission.

In the shelter where I met William, worship services reflected this radical redefinition of God’s family. Alongside the homeless and poor of our town, a local businessman came to worship in the shelter and share the story of his battle with alcoholism. A dignified retired woman showed up to remember the year that she spent destitute and homeless. A mentally ill woman came to sing the hymn that brought her peace: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

The invitation to join God’s family takes its toll on Jesus’ relationships. One strand in the narrative highlights Jesus as a rebellious child and brother who was willing to break the tight bonds of family in his devotion to God. This emphasizes the way the gospel claims an allegiance that transcends even the most important human relationships.

But there is another way of conceiving Jesus’ break with his family. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus is first and foremost the Son of

Jesus will not allow us to separate faith from faithfulness or discipleship from submission.

God (1:1). Thus, instead of casting Jesus as the rebellious child, this text shows us that it’s those who resist Jesus’ teaching and reject his ministry who are the rebellious ones.

If we read Mark 3 with this emphasis on Jesus as the faithful Son, we hear a bit of the Old Testament in Jesus’ words. Moses blesses Levi’s break with his kin: “[He] said of his father and mother, ‘I regard them not’; he ignored his kin, and did not acknowledge his children” (Deut. 33:9). Through his singular devotion to God, Levi can make an acceptable offering to God on behalf of the people.

I can imagine William, after hearing about the one who is faithful on behalf of those who are not, shouting in his ragged southern voice: “Thanks be to God!”

The author is Chris Blumhofer, doctoral student in New Testament at Duke University and candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Do we know where our food comes from?

Eating in ignorance

by Norman Wirzba

IT HAD BEEN another tough day. When Matthew arrived at his office he opened an e-mail that turned his day upside down. Thinking he was going to put the finishing touches on an overdue report, he instead discovered that a branch office was in crisis mode. He spent the day putting out fires he didn't start.

Matthew was supposed to be home by four so he could prepare dinner for the kids before the night's soccer practice. That didn't happen. Running late, he entered the drive-thru restaurant and picked up an order of chicken nuggets, fries, chocolate milk and apple wedges. They all ate in the car on the way to the practice field. His wife was not happy to see the fast food bags—again. But she is really busy too. In his defense, Matthew showed her the uneaten apples as a sign that he was trying to make the best of the situation.

This scenario is hardly atypical. America has been dubbed the "fast food nation" because relatively few of us have the time to make good eating a priority. The drive-thru lanes at fast food chains have a steady stream of vehicles. Grocery store managers who order the tens of thousands of different food products know that convenience is a high priority for consumers, so they stock multiple kinds of prepared and processed items—"foods" that can be prepared quickly with the push of a microwave button.

Time isn't the only major factor shaping the way our nation eats. The other is cost. Though we expect serving sizes to be large, we also expect the price to be cheap. Owing to the distortions of our industrial food system, it is often cheaper to buy a hamburger than a head of broccoli, cheaper to get a bottle of soda than a bottle of water.

All of our cheap food, however, comes at a very high cost. The sticker price at the store does not reflect the costs associated with eroded and chemically laden soils, poisoned and depleted waters, the burning of vast quantities of fossil fuels, abused animals, abused farmworkers, poorly treated and poorly compensated food-service providers, and the myriad number of diet-related diseases that are causing health-care costs to skyrocket. Our demand for cheap food is slowly degrading and destroying all life on our planet. It is a demand made by a generation of people that is spending the smallest percentage of income on food we have ever known.

A lot of this convenient, cheap food tastes pretty good. Sodium, sugars, fats and artificial flavorings have been generously added to give us a (temporarily) satisfied feeling. But if

we could get behind the slick packaging and enticing presentation, we would discover that we have much to be ashamed about. To be ashamed means that we know we have done wrong before one another. It means that we have not treated others in a way that honors and respects their integrity.

But many of us are not ashamed about our eating. The reason? We are not in a position, nor do we take the time, to appreciate how our desire for convenience and cheapness is so destructive of the sources of life. Today's average eater is likely the most ignorant eater in history. How many of us grow any food at all? Relatively few people know where their food comes from or understand the conditions necessary for it to be

All of our cheap food comes at a very high cost.

safely, sustainably and nutritiously produced. Our food industry doesn't want you to know.

I teach a class on eating and the life of faith, and at the opening of each class a different student reports on a favorite food. I've asked them to research where the food comes from and how it is produced and marketed and to assess its nutritional value. Almost without fail they begin their presentation by saying, "Well, I won't be eating this anymore!"

They also report on how difficult it was for them to learn about the food. When food companies are contacted, they rarely give straight or helpful answers. Websites are full of misinformation. The companies don't want you to understand the food. They want you to think their products are fun or sexy or performance enhancing.

The shame of our eating becomes clearer when we consider the chicken nuggets that millions of children like to eat. To be placed on a kid's menu this food item has to be cheap. To make it cheap the chicken producer has to be paid the smallest amount possible. To raise chickens most efficiently, the producer has to find ways to get more chickens into his or her barns and then get them to butcher weight as quickly as

Norman Wirzba teaches at Duke Divinity School. This article is excerpted from *Making Peace with the Land: God's Call to Reconcile with Creation*, coauthored with Fred Bahnson and just published by InterVarsity Press. Used by permission.



possible. To do that it is best to genetically alter chickens so that their breasts become huge (Americans crave white meat) really fast.

Today's engineered, confined chicken reaches full size in nearly half the time when compared to traditional breeds. The enlarged breasts of these birds become so burdensome that many chickens' legs break under their own crushing weight. It is also important that their diets be supplemented by antibiotics because crammed chicken houses are breeding grounds for disease. It isn't important that chickens have room to roam, because their breasts are so large that walking is difficult. It also makes it easier for them to be caught by the poorly paid (often undocumented) migrant workers who cram them into the cages that will deliver them to a slaughterhouse where they will be disassembled on a factory line.

Very little, if anything, in this process honors or treats these chickens as gifts of God. Industrial methods of chicken production require that they fall within a business logos or logic and production system that stresses efficiency, uniformity and profitability. If we had the mind of Christ, however, we would have to be thinking about what we can do to make sure that our relationships with chickens contribute to their nurture, health and even delight. Why? Because if Christ is the eternal Logos, the one through whom and for whom the whole world is created (Col. 1:16), and if God's good news has been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (1:23), then chickens no less than people are part of his renewing ministry that leads all creatures into the fullness of life. Inspired and shaped by Christ's reconciling life, we must concern ourselves with the well-being of animals, endeavoring to make sure that they are enabled to live the life God intends for them. When we treat chickens the way God expects, which means that we devote

ourselves to their care, shame disappears to make room for celebration.

Just as Jesus was known as the one who "welcomes sinners and eats with them," the early Christian community that formed together in faithfulness to him was known for its glad and generous eating. Speaking of the Christian followers formed at Pentecost, Luke records that "day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:46–47). We could say that Jesus' eating with them inspired them to eat in ways that bore witness to God's continuing presence in their midst.

Distinctly Christian forms of eating occur when Christ is present within us, enabling us to see, engage and taste the world in ways that are pleasing to him and bear witness to his continuing Spirit-inspired presence among us. As the apostle Paul put it, we should no longer consider others from our own, often self-serving point of view. Instead we should be so attuned to Jesus' way of being with others that we can say, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

One of the central places where intimacy with Christ can develop is around the table Christians call the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. Here Christians eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus so that he can nurture us into the life that bears witness to him. If we are what we eat, then eating Jesus should make us like him.

John's Gospel describes this inner transformation in graphic terms. After describing himself as the "bread of life," Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.... for my

flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:53–56). To eat and drink Jesus is to coabide with him. It is to live because of him. When Christ abides in us—by our eating of him—our relationships with others are inspired and directed to take on his characteristics of attention, care, nurture, healing and reconciliation because these are the defining characteristics of Christ's life. The Logos through whom the world is created and made fully alive now enters into us so that we can participate in the ways of genuine life.

For much of the Christian tradition the Eucharist has been understood as a sacrificial meal. This is important because the high point of Jesus' ministry is his offering of himself to the point of death on a cross. The cross is not only an emblem of our violence and shame. It is also where God reveals definitively that true and abundant life consists in the complete and costly giving of oneself to another. The form of life that succeeds by grasping or hoarding or profiteering—all forms abundantly on display in today's food production system and in fast food eating patterns—is precisely the kind of life that Jesus came to correct through his own example. There is no resurrection life without the self-giving that the cross reveals.

The Eucharist, in other words, is not an occasional nibbling session at which Christians recall the violence done to their Lord. It is the table where we go to die ourselves. It is the regular time when we learn to put to death all the self-serving

impulses that distort and degrade the world around us. Here we learn to live the baptism in which we die and are buried with Christ so that we can also be raised with him into the newness of life that glorifies God rather than ourselves (Rom. 6:3–11). We die to sin so that we can be alive to God.

John's Gospel describes this sacrificial movement using a metaphor well known to farmers and gardeners: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Jesus is not simply talking about seed. He is talking about the movement and fertility of life itself. God creates a world in which life fully becomes itself only insofar as each creature is a giving member to the whole. There is no life in isolation, fragmentation, alienation or self-withdrawal. This is why Jesus continued by saying, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). For us to live in a way that witnesses to Christ's transforming presence within us and that gives glory to God means that we must learn to give ourselves away by offering ourselves to the nurture of others. Put succinctly, at the Lord's Supper we are nourished by Jesus so that we can nourish the world around us.

It is tempting to confine eucharistic eating to a ritual realm. When this happens, the table around which Christians gather stays in a sanctuary and does not translate to our kitchen tables at home or to the dining tables in restaurants and cafeterias. This

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is a serious error. The life and ministry of Jesus is not a pious idea. It is an economic revolution that has multiple practical effects. Recall that the members of the early Christian community that gladly and generously ate together were also known to sell their possessions, give to those who had need and hold things in common. In a line that ought to astound us, Luke says, "There was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34.) To eat in such a way that we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us means that we will give ourselves—our attention, our skills, our energy and our possessions—to others so that we all flourish together. Eucharistic table manners result in sacrificial forms of living in which the meeting of the needs of others is the defining concern.

We become agents of the gospel "good news" when we become the kinds of eaters the Eucharist makes possible. Eucharistic eating does not only transform the eating we do with people that happens at a particular table, as when we learn to become more attentive and hospitable to each other. It also transforms the entire act of eating, which means it changes the way we go about growing, harvesting, processing, distributing, preparing and then sharing the food we daily eat.

What would self-offering look like if we tried to realize it in today's industrial food system? To answer this question we need to make an important distinction between self-offering and self-imposition. Out of a well-meaning desire to do good or simply get by, it is all too easy to impose a plan on others that we think will be to our mutual benefit. So a farmer may, for instance, look at a field and determine that he or she should grow a lot of potatoes. Growing a lot of potatoes is good because then there is more food to feed the world. To maximize yield the farmer will also use synthetic fertilizers and a regular cocktail of poisons to deal with potato plant pests. This scenario follows the logos of industrial potato production.

What is missing in this logos is the desire first and always to attend to the land. In an industrial system land is simply viewed as a resource to be used to satisfy aims that may or may not be good for the land itself. Here land is reduced to the place where human ambition is imposed upon it. Little thought is given to how the imposition may result in considerable harm to the soil and water and to the health of the plants, animals and humans that nourish themselves in this toxic site. To attend to the land means that a variety of questions need to be kept in mind: How much soil is being eroded or degraded with this agricultural technique? What is the quality of the groundwater in the area owing to the use of a steady stream of fertilizers and herbicides? Are the microorganisms in the soil healthy and thriving, and so daily contributing to the fertility of the soil? What is the nutrient quality of the potato that is grown in industrial conditions? Are the workers in the fields safe and fairly treated and compensated? Answering these questions requires clear and detailed vision. You have to get close and stay there to determine what is really going on.

During the civil rights movement it became apparent that genuine reconciliation between people simply is not possible unless whites and blacks physically relocate so as to be in close and sustained proximity with each other. People need to dwell together in ways that allow them to see and learn each other's

pains and joys, their limits and potential. Though legal integration of school districts is possible through the efforts of people who may not deeply know or care about each other, the reconciliation that leads to a beloved community is not possible from a distance or via a bureaucratic logos. Community presupposes people who are ready to offer themselves to each other so that personal desire is overtaken by a desire for the other. It is, following the apostle Paul's formulation, to have the needs, desires and joys of others in me in such a way that my needs, desires and enjoyments in life make no sense apart from the fellowship of the life we live together. Only then can people become the sort of community that functions like an organic body—no member or part alone, but all working together to be a healthy whole.

Creation does not exist for our exclusive benefit.

Reconciliation with the land requires a similar kind of relocation. It presupposes that we get close to the land so that we can see in precise ways both the good and the harmful effects of our decisions and action and thus be in a position to correct the harm and celebrate the good. For too much of human history we have not really attended to or known the land upon which we dwell and from which we nourish our life. In our hubris and neglect we have thus exhausted, degraded and destroyed much of it. In our ambition we have ruined where we are and then moved on to "virgin territory" or "greener pastures." We have not settled our land in ways that indicate our respect and care for other creatures, nor have we given due consideration to the ecosystem limits and potential latent within every habitat. The history of American settlement witnesses to a logos of exploitation in which the machinery of bulldozers, guns, dynamite, dams and poison have been used to impose our will upon the world.

Put in more theological terms, we have failed to appreciate that creation forms a vast and indescribably complex, organic membership. We are only one member within this creation. It does not exist for our exclusive benefit. As God reminded Job, the earth is full of creatures that are of no use to us but are of intimate concern to God: "Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (Job 38:41). It contains creatures like the mighty Leviathan that can kill us but are a particular delight to God: "I will not keep silence concerning its limbs, or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame" (41:12).

Creation exists for our health and nurture, but it is not made for our exclusive enjoyment. When we become attentive we quickly learn that there is much within it that can harm us, even kill us. Not everything that looks good is edible. We have to be careful, knowledgeable and respectful. We have to learn that sometimes the best thing for us to do is leave some creatures and their places alone. Above all, we need to be willing to make ourselves students of the places where we are so that we can be instructed in the ways of faithful living there. That is where self-offering begins.



The politics of Israeli archaeology

Controversial dig

by Mordechai Beck

IN ISRAEL, archaeology is followed with the same passion that soccer excites in other countries. That's because archaeological findings—especially ones that reveal Jews' ancient attachment to the land—have political meaning. As Israelis see it, such findings show that this is their land and no one can take it from them.

The problem, of course, is that another people—the Palestinians—have similar claims to the same land. Often the two sets of claims clash. The conflict sharpened after 1967 when Israel captured the whole of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Israeli government passed a law uniting the city of Jerusalem—an act that the international community does not recognize as legal. At the same time, Israel made the Temple Mount (known to Muslims as Haram el-Sharif), Judaism's most holy site, an Arab enclave under the control of the Wakf, the Arab Religious Council.

The Israelis have continued to dig all around Jerusalem, while the Palestinians have tried to stop digs that they see as infringements on their sacred territory. In the 1990s, Muslims undertook their own dig on the southeast corner of the Temple Mount as part of providing new access to the Marwani Mosque (also known as Solomon's Stables). The dig was criticized by Israelis for taking place without the proper archaeological supervision, and some Israeli archaeologists charged that the Muslim excavators hid evidence of ancient Jewish presence at the site.

Recently, attention has been focused on a site known as the City of David, which lies just south of Jerusalem's Old City. Archaeologists are exploring a site on and around the stream of Gihon, a site associated with the origins of the city. Jerusalem, like so many cities, was founded on or near a water source.

Nowadays this area is a tourist site run by the private Jewish organization Elad, which leads visitors through a complex of tunnels and cavernous spaces that show how the ancients created a water system that allowed them to live on the not very large hill that is the center of Jerusalem.

The people who were responsible for the original structure were probably Canaanites, specifically the people known in the Bible as Jebusites. According to 2 Samuel 5, David took the city from the Jebusites (around 1000 BCE) and turned the city into his capital.

David's son Solomon expanded the site to include a garden—still bearing fruit today—at the base of the hill, which was perhaps the inspiration for much of the sensual imagery in the Song of Songs. Next to this site is a recently discovered stair-

way that once led to the Second Temple. The stairs, built in the era of Herod, are some 600 meters long and were the main way by which Israelites climbed to the temple.

Halfway up the ridge is a site dug by British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon from 1960 to 1967. It possibly contains the "Millo" or earthen platform mentioned in the biblical description of David's capture of the city (2 Samuel 5; 1 Kings 9). Kenyon uncovered and partially reconstructed a massive wall that stands overlooking the Kidron Valley.

At the top of the hill directly beneath the southern walls of the Old City is a site being excavated by the Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar. She claims that this is the site of King David's fortified palace. Other scholars dispute that claim, saying that the ruins stem from an older period, probably from that of the Jebusites.

To whom does the City of David belong?

"I'm not saying conclusively that this is David's fortress or palace," says Mazar. "But until anyone brings proof that it isn't, I'm sticking to my theory."

"As for pottery," says Mazar, "that is a disputable way of deciding the age of a site. What we have found in the site could be [dated] ten or 20 years one way or the other. So dating the site as David's is certainly in the realm of the possible."

Other structures from the biblical period thought to be in the area are the defensive walls built by Hezekiah or his son Menashe (2 Kings 23 and 24) to protect the water sources; Hezekiah's Tunnel, which was dug into the side of the ridge to defend the city against the Assyrian King Sennaharib (in 702 BCE); and the so-called Jeremiah's Pit, which is unlikely to be the exact pit where the prophet Jeremiah was placed but which no doubt resembles it in its gloomy atmosphere.

The archaeological questions have large political dimensions. Sitting above these archaeological sites of the City of David are the homes of Palestinian Arabs, some of whom have been living there since before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. Many resemble shantytown dwellings; some have been sold to Israelis.

Mordechai Beck is a freelance journalist in Jerusalem.



AT THE CITY OF DAVID: Visitors to this archaeological dig in Jerusalem can pause at the entrance to look over the Kidron Valley to the Palestinian village of Silwan (left) and later enter Hezekiah's Tunnel, which dates from the eighth century BCE.

The area around the city walls has been declared a national park under management of the Nature and Parks Authority. Toward the top of the hill is a visitors center created by Elad, whose name means “God is eternal” in Hebrew and is also an acronym in Hebrew for “Toward the City of David.”

Elad has only tenuous connections with the NPA, and its role in operating the tourist site has been legally challenged. Elad, like the Shalem Institute, which also supports the City of David project, is financed by private donors, many of them from the U.S.

Neither Elad nor Shalem hides its nationalistic Israeli agenda of celebrating Jewish origins on the site. For many Israelis, the city belongs to the Jewish people since David took it over some 3,000 years ago. That it fell into foreign hands is merely one of the twists of history, as they see it. To counteract the narrative presented by Elad, the Palestinian community has opened its alternative interpretation center.

Whom does the City of David belong to? Does it belong to the State of Israel or to the many private homeowners? Is its maintenance the role of the municipality of Jerusalem, the Nature and Parks Authority, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), the Ministry of Tourism, the Hebrew University—or, as seems to be the case recently, does it belong to Elad, which has taken over the day-to-day running of the area as well as the funding of the archaeological digs carried out by the IAA? The IAA opposed Elad’s activity in 1997 but in 2002 decided to allow it.

The private funding of digs is not unusual—most archaeological digs throughout the world have been funded by private monies. But this Israeli choice is politically significant. By delegating responsibility for the City of David to Elad, the NPA, the municipality of Jerusalem and ultimately the government of Israel have freed themselves from the responsibility of overseeing the site.

It is clear that Elad wishes to Judaize the city as much as



possible. It pays Palestinian homeowners good money to sell their homes. I heard a story from a former Elad guide who said that one Palestinian agreed to sell on condition that it would be made to seem as if he were forced to sell—otherwise he was afraid he would be targeted by Palestinians. I can’t corroborate the story, but it indicates how contested the area is.

The Palestinians living in Wadi Hilwa/Silwan, the East Jerusalem neighborhood around the City of David, say that their proposal for development in the area and their effort to get a part in the tourism industry were rejected by Jerusalem officials. One result was that the Palestinians left the municipal committee overseeing the area.

An organization of left-wing Israeli archaeologists called Emek Shaveh is opposed to what Elad is doing. It sees Jerusalem as a multicultural city which must acknowledge the historical interests of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

“What all sides must come to realize,” said Yonathan Mizrachi, head of Emek Shaveh, “is that Jerusalem is for everybody. No one owns her.... She has to be shared.”

Neither Palestinians nor Israelis speak with one voice on the excavations. Countless committees have been formed with different causes. The topic is so politically sensitive for the Israeli government that it employs a sort of doubletalk on the subject. For example, in a recent article on the unauthorized Temple Mount/Haram el-Sharif digs by Muslims, a spokesperson from the prime minister’s office was quoted as saying that a report on the dig was published but not released—and that failure was attributed not to the government but to “a subcommittee of the committee on foreign relations and security.”

Clearly, political calculation figures into every archaeological decision in Jerusalem, despite the assertion of Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize-winning author, that Jerusalem “has to be above politics.” As it happens, Wiesel is chair of Elad’s advisory board.

What drives the ‘spiritual but not religious’?

The seeker next door

by Linda Mercadante

IF YOU'RE ASKED to imagine a typical “spiritual but not religious” person (SBNR), you might envision a middle-class white woman with time on her hands, wearing a new yoga outfit, sitting in a lotus position and meditating. The television series *Enlightened* offers such an example: it features a disillusioned corporate manager (played by Laura Dern) who spends \$50,000 at a New Age treatment center in Hawaii, where she meditates on the beach, practices yoga and attends support groups. She comes back “enlightened” and tries, fairly unsuccessfully, to live out her new vision of life and communicate it to coworkers, friends and family.

It's tempting to dismiss SBNRs as salad-bar spiritualists concerned primarily with themselves. But for both demographic and theological reasons it is important to think more deeply about the people who invoke that description. They represent a profound challenge and an opportunity for religious groups today. Furthermore, from my intensive series of interviews over the past few years with people who regard themselves as SBNR, I've learned that many popular assumptions about this group are off target.

The SBNR phenomenon is not restricted to any part of the country. One can find SBNRs among rural Ohioans and small-town Michiganders, not just among bicoastal urbanites. They come from various socioeconomic and educational levels and racial-ethnic backgrounds. Politically, they tend to be more liberal than conservative, in large part because they identify closed-minded, harmful religion with right-wing politics.

A common assumption is that SBNRs operate outside the world of organized religion. I've found, however, that many of the people who regularly or irregularly show up in the pews apply the SBNR label to themselves. Scratch below the surface of an average Protestant or Catholic church and you will find many who resonate to this description. They may attend church on Sunday but during the week pursue meditation, yoga, Reiki sessions, energy work and A Course in Miracles and read books by such non-Christian gurus as Eckhart Tolle or Deepak Chopra. Oftentimes, clergy themselves are among them. These SBNRs often say their various pursuits are a useful adjunct to traditional religious practices.

Nor are SBNRs necessarily wounded in some way by the church. I've found that many SBNRs come from nonreligious or barely religious backgrounds. Many of the younger SBNRs I meet were either purposely raised with no religion or come from mixed-faith homes where religion was left to personal

choice, and so they had only a smattering of exposure to organized religion.

Few tell stories of abuse, prejudice or harm. For those who do have distressing stories about being involved in religious institutions, they seem to have encountered problems not just in organized Christianity but in other religions and in alternative spirituality groups as well.

Many of my SBNR interviewees who had some experience with church talked wistfully about the community and sense of purpose they felt when they were involved. These people show no hostility to clergy and speak favorably of the power that church music and ritual had for them.

I've heard many seminarians, professors and academics imply that SBNRs are anti-intellectual, unwilling or unable to grapple with serious belief issues. But that hasn't been my observation. Instead, I have found people eager to consider the big questions with which theology deals. In fact, for those who

The rise of SBNRs represents a theological sea change—and an opportunity.

have left organized religion behind, the most often cited reason for leaving is that their theological questions were left unanswered or answered in simplistic ways. Most claim that no one has ever given them the chance to learn and dialogue about theological concerns.

Some intellectuals suggest that if SBNRs were really thoughtful about spirituality, they would be troubled by the inconsistencies that arise from their “mix and match” or syncretistic approach to religion. It is true that many SBNRs do not approach religion intellectually. But Americans have long tended toward a subjective, stimulation-seeking, experiential orientation toward religion.

I did find many people operating with a cobbled-together set of ideas gleaned from many diverse sources. But only a few insisted that the resulting inconsistencies were proof of “myste-

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terity" and authenticity. A larger percentage acted quite surprised when the inconsistencies were pointed out.

Of course, their inconsistency or experimentalism does not make them much different from many of the people in the pews. As religious professionals are well aware, few church members have a neatly packaged set of beliefs displaying consistency and depth. There are many members of the "fuzzy faithful." Yet my interviewees seemed genuinely concerned when, in trying to articulate their beliefs, they uncovered the unexamined and inconsistent positions they held.

Perhaps the most common and pejorative assumption about SBNRs is that they are self-absorbed narcissists, commitment-phobes or just plain lazy. It is true that many of the SBNRs I talked to were highly individualistic, very unlike the joiners of the 1950s. A majority refrain from attaching themselves to organized religious groups and from making long-term institutional commitments. This should not be surprising given the nature of our epoch, with its market-driven environment, media-driven blurring of boundaries between fantasy and reality, and mobile, transient, rootless existence. Individualism, self-focus and self-protective strategies are everywhere taught and practiced today. Self-help groups and books—including those marketed to clergy—regularly teach self-care as a primary survival and healing tool. Add to this a pervasive society-wide cynicism toward institutions and authority and the SBNR resistance to joining is not hard to understand.

But even with all of these factors, I have not found SBNRs to be unusually allergic to commitment or inordinately self-absorbed. Rather, they hold back from involvement for reasons of personal integrity. They insist that they don't join religious groups because they do not want to misrepresent themselves or promise something that they cannot deliver or live by.

Some observers might see this stance as an excuse for laziness, and others might fundamentally disagree with the reasoning behind it. After all, many people do affiliate with groups even when they can't affirm everything the group professes, and many people with religious doubts are often willing to hang on in religious institutions as they seek for answers. Not everyone feels they need to abandon ship at the first sign of conflict or disappointment. Nevertheless, my interviewees' insistence on integrity is an important factor to understand when we assess their attitude toward religious belonging.

The adamant bifurcation of spirituality and religion—a nearly universal trait among SBNRs—can be criticized as an artificial separation, since there is much functional overlap between the terms. Nevertheless, the majority of my inter-

viewees insist that spirituality is the personal center and quest for an individual, whereas religion is something external, rule-ridden and institutional. In their thinking, religion is nothing more than a dispensable shell.

A little probing with a thoughtful interviewee usually reveals, however, that this isn't a deep philosophical tenet but more of a rhetorical strategy to get out from under the weight of traditional authority. Clearly it is also a very useful strategy for those who are selling alternative spiritualties.

Against the common view that SBNRs are the wounded, the shallow, the lazy or the dilettantes, it's becoming clear to me that SBNRs distance themselves from religion for deeper reasons, even what one might call theological reasons. Neither churches nor sociological surveys have probed deeply enough into the minds of this admittedly eclectic, diverse group.

In my interviews I have focused on beliefs in four major areas: the sacred, human nature, community and the after-life. These categories correspond to major theological loci, namely God, anthropology, ecclesiology and eschatology. Since my respondents largely come out of a Western cultural milieu, and from a country that still has a large percentage of Christians, they would likely have considered these issues. Hearing respondents talk at length on these topics makes it clear how profoundly challenging the views of SBNRs are to religion as usual.

The most striking thing I've found is that many of the com-

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mon beliefs of SBNRs are in direct opposition to beliefs they associate with Christianity. In their reflections, I hear an implicit critique of the positions they think most Christians hold—but which most SBNRs have imbibed only secondhand.

For instance, SBNRs strongly object to the idea that one religion has all the answers or that there is only one way to be “saved.” Many are not sure that salvation is the right goal anyway. They reject the view that humans are defective and need help from outside themselves. They are unsure whether there is any kind of sovereign, transcendent, personal deity. And they often reject the idea that one’s eternal destiny is decided in this

lifetime. Their complaints are not new or surprising, and some of them echo America’s underlying Pelagianism. The growth in numbers of those who hold these views, however, seems unprecedented.

Many people within churches are themselves reconsidering some of these positions, making ad hoc modifications to faith as they go along or espousing much more nuanced views. The SBNRs I meet are largely unaware of this development and rarely make any distinctions between different kinds of Christians or between popular theology and more sophisticated theological views. So they feel compelled to reject Christianity as a whole.

I don’t see among SBNRs the “turn to the East” that some have discerned. A number of my interviewees have experimented with aspects of Buddhism, Zen, Sufism or Hinduism and imbibed certain principles of Eastern religion, but very few commit themselves to these other traditions. The minority who try to join another religion tell me they find it difficult to adapt. Often it is specifically theological issues that trouble them. Even while they are making the standard critiques of Christianity, many maintain a nascent Christian framework—they seek a personal, involved deity, hope their identity will somehow continue after death, and long to be part of spiritual fellowship along the lines of a Christian congregation. They often seem embarrassed about these continuities with Christian tradition or contend that it is an area they must “work on.”

However, the Eastern veneer in the SBNR thought world has the potential to change Western theology in profound ways. My conversation partners’ image of the sacred tends toward the monistic. They entertain thoughts of reincarnation and past lives, focus on spiritual practices that downplay the rational, talk of karma rather than sin or mercy and cluster around a fluctuating, changing cast of gurus. Nevertheless, the result is mostly a very American blend of different themes. The movement shares views inherited from 19th-century transcendentalism and spiritualism as well as certain ideas from the 1960s and ’70s, such as an emphasis on experience, antihierarchicalism and personal freedom.

SBNRs are frequently “perennialists,” insisting that all religions at their core teach the same things and that all mystics from whatever religion seek and have the same experience. For many,

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Jesus is simply one more “enlightened master,” and all religions are fair game for borrowing, often with no attribution or acknowledgment.

The SBNRs I interviewed were excited that I was researching their beliefs. People begged me to interview them, and almost every conversation has ended with a spontaneous hug from the interviewee. Even some clergy have tried to persuade me that they meet the criteria for being interviewed. Most surprising, no one has balked at or questioned my focus on core theological themes, in spite of the surface assertion of SBNRs that belief does not matter. Instead, respondents have been thrilled by the opportunity to articulate their views and by having someone take them seriously.

The rise of SBNRs represents a theological sea change that may quietly but profoundly alter the spiritual and theological landscape of America. Whether this alteration becomes beneficial or harmful to existing institutions depends at least partly on how institutions respond. Churches open to the things on the surface that SBNRs look for—informality, nonhierarchical leadership, recognition of diversity, deep participation—are more likely to be comfortable for SBNRs. But such surface changes go only so far.

Even more important than dispelling stereotypes about SBNRs is engaging them theologically. Unless the church takes seriously the theological reasons that they give for staying away from organized religion, any efforts to engage this population will be hampered. SBNRs represent an opportunity for churches to reinvigorate their ability to speak and think theologically.

Churches may well make the more superficial changes that SBNRs look for and have some success at attracting people with one foot in and one foot out of the church. Attending to opportunities for spiritual growth—such as offering classes on Christian meditation and other spiritual disciplines—will also be helpful. But these efforts will likely not attract the more serious seekers—the ones with the most potential for challenging churches to grow spiritually and theologically. A deeper, more constructive approach would be to address the four theological loci mentioned above—the sacred (God), human nature (theological anthropology), community (ecclesiology) and the afterlife (eschatology)—and bring SBNRs’ misperceptions and challenges out into the open.

For instance, to those SBNRs who believe they are coterminous with the divine, Christians can speak about the Holy Spirit which resides within but also highlight the distinction that Christian faith makes between God and humans.

And to those SBNRs who want to affirm that humans are inherently good, the Christians can explain that their faith affirms that God created everything good and intends to restore humans to that state—but that between creation and restoration all of us have been swept up into a state of alienation from God which we cannot ignore. Many SBNRs will agree that as much as they want to affirm their connection with Spirit and inherent goodness, something is standing in the way of fully activating their potential.

As these two examples show, churches have many points at which to engage in theological conversation with SBNRs. But churches will have to be creative in fostering the venues for these discussions. The most likely audience is postcollege young adults, for they are both the most underserved group and also the most receptive to such discussions.

Although not everyone I meet can be categorized as a dedicated seeker, I have found many who are willing to spend considerable money and energy trying to satisfy their spiritual hungers. I have also found people whose lack of experience with or misinformation about organized religion, in particular Christianity, is keeping them away from religious institutions. I have found people excited but often overwhelmed by the plethora of new and alternative spiritualities, wellness programs and competing claims of ancient wisdom. What is most striking is how hungry people are for both serious discussion and opportunities to grow spiritually. cc

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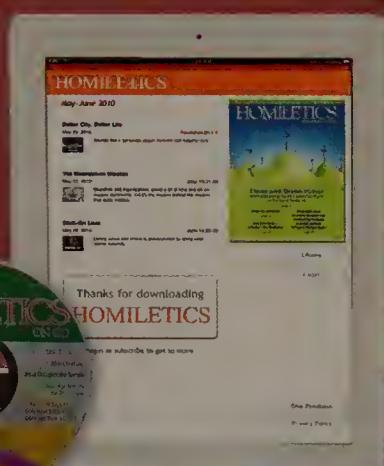


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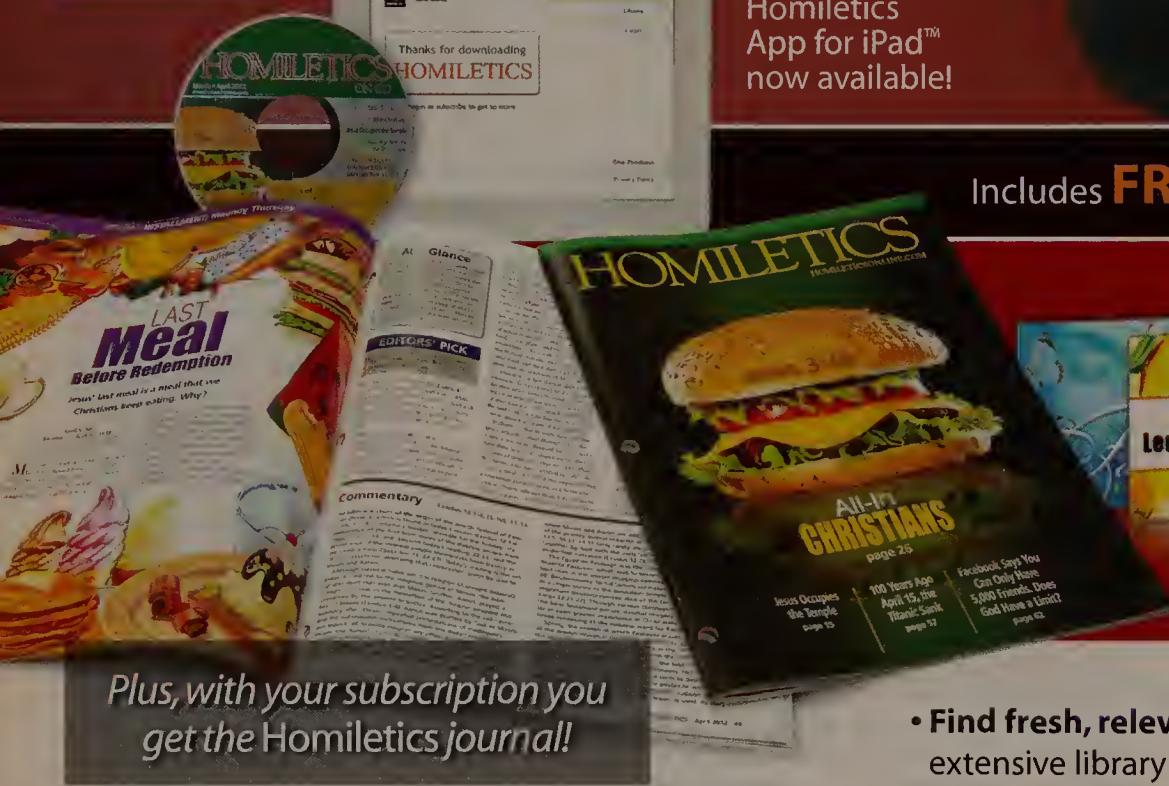
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by M. Craig Barnes

Holy small talk

I TARRIED AT the door of the sanctuary following worship as people said things like “Pastor, Bob is having surgery on Wednesday. Can you stop by the hospital?” But as soon as possible I ran to my office, took off my vestments and made my way to the fellowship hall, where the congregation was already delighting in our annual chili lunch. Every year when I wake up on this morning I think, “Really? *Chili Sunday?*” I can put Third Sunday after Epiphany at the top of the bulletin if I want, but everybody in the congregation knows that at long last it is Chili Sunday.

We are a liturgical and unapologetically formal congregation. Most of the people in the pews dress up in their Sunday best. We’re polite and hospitable, but not laid back. If I were to suggest that worshipers hold hands while we all sing a chorus of “Alleluia,” more than one member would go into cardiac arrest. It took me a while to figure this out, but our congregation finds comfort in formality—especially when we are approaching God. So it’s ironic that only Easter surpasses Chili Sunday for worship attendance.

Members are invited to make their favorite chili recipe and bring it in a Crock-Pot to church. The staff and volunteers set the serving bowls of chili out on long serving tables with little placards that identify the person who prepared each bowl. The beef chili is on one table while the turkey, chicken and vegetarian chili are on others. People hurry to the fellowship hall after worship, plunge into this banquet and find their way to seats at round tables.

By the time I arrive, people are lost in conversation. As the pastor I butterfly around their small talk. I used to hope that they were all talking about the lofty themes of the sermon. I imagined them asking each other, “So what do you think he meant by the grace of God?” or “What does that have to do with Afghanistan?” or at least, “Have you heard that Bob is having surgery Wednesday?” But I’ve learned to raise my expectations.

It is over bowls of chili that the theology becomes incarnational and takes on all of the fleshly concerns they brought to church that day. What they say is, “How is your job search going?” Whether they realize it or not, they’re actually asking each other, “Do you think God cares?” So they are talking about the sermon on grace after all. This is how they raise my expectations of the sermon—they weave it into small talk. After 30 years of pastoral ministry, I have finally discovered the theology of small talk over a bowl of chili. It’s not small at all.

The folding tables in the fellowship hall are not formal pieces of ecclesiastical furniture like the sanctuary’s communion table. But they give us a sacramental glimpse of the Christ who is among us in ordinary places. This has always been one of the church’s best ideas—we are a religion whose faithful need to eat together.

My brother and I, who grew up as pastor’s kids, once tried to count up how many meals we had eaten in a church basement while sitting on metal chairs. I would tell you the number, but it’s too high to be believed. We sat at a table with our friends from the youth group and talked about sports, cars or which one of us was the biggest nerd. Meanwhile our parents were talking about the economy or what to do about the church lawn or why their teenagers gave them so many worries.

Jesus wants to enter all of this small talk just as much as he does our concerns about war-torn countries or Bob going to the hospital this Wednesday. The Gospels account for less than

Jesus sneaks into some ordinary conversations.

a year of his three-year ministry on earth. That means that at the end of two out of three days Matthew, Mark, Luke and John looked at each other and said, “Don’t bother writing about today.” Even the Savior had laundry days. But that sanctifies the ordinary things that take up most of our lives.

Jesus may appreciate my sermons that work out the dynamics of being adopted into the triune communion, but I doubt they impress him. This theology is a critically important message of hope, and I work very hard to get it right, but I have a hunch most preaching is met by a divine shrug that says, “Yeah, that’s about right.” What excites Jesus is to sneak into a conversation over a bowl of chili when worship is over.

Worshiping with elegance is our congregation’s way of paying attention to “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” But people crowd into the fellowship hall for a bowl of chili because their souls hunger for an ordinary variety of holiness. We expect to find Jesus the Savior in the church sanctuary, hospital or places of crises. We yearn to find him on laundry day.

M. Craig Barnes is pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church and teaches at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

The lure of Jonestown

by Valerie Weaver-Zercher

Working as a secretary in the late 1960s, Edith Roller watched as student sit-ins engulfed her office at San Francisco State College. Angered by the college administration's proffering of student records to the Selective Service for draft purposes, the students protested for months and were met with police in riot gear. Roller, who was in her sixties, was also disturbed by the injustices of the Vietnam War and the racist policies of the U.S. government. She had watched her father, a miner, die from black lung disease and had developed a commitment to helping the weak stand up against the powerful. Now, watching protesting students being beaten bloody by police officers, Roller decided to speak up. She resigned from her position at the university because of the institution's "outright fascist trends" and sent a press release to local newspapers explaining her decision.

The short article about Roller that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* caught the eye of Jim Jones, then a young preacher with a growing church committed to social justice. His aides invited Roller to their church, Peoples Temple, and Roller was pleased to find a community where she could work for the ideals she cared about so deeply. She began attending and within a few years had moved into communal quarters with other Peoples Temple members. She began keeping a diary, at Jones's request, which would become a historical record of the temple. In January 1978 she moved with others in her church to a new settlement in Guyana. Less than a year later, she died there, along with more than 900 other people.

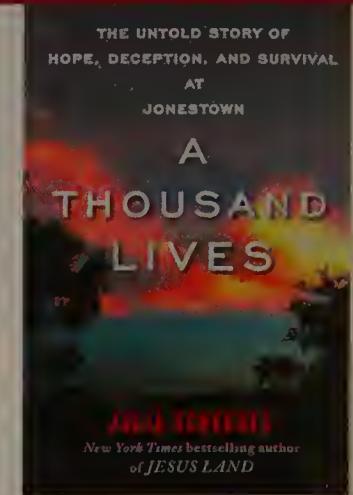
Julia Scheeres tells Roller's story in *A Thousand Lives*, the most recent addition to the literature on what has been called

the "catastrophic millennialism" of Jim Jones. Scheeres chronicles the story of Jones, the members of Peoples Temple and their communitarian commitments and the colony in Guyana whose violent end in 1978 is both memorialized and trivialized in pop culture's references to "drinking the Kool-Aid."

The subtitle claims that this is the "untold story" of Jonestown because Scheeres's research tapped FBI files made public three years ago. But the story of Peoples Temple has been told over and over again, by academics and journalists and artists and survivors. Over 40 books have already made Jonestown their sole focus. These retellings, including Scheeres's, are testaments to the magnitude of the tragedy and the multiplicity of lenses through which it can be viewed. Authors ponder what Jonestown stood for, the balance of good and evil it contained, and how what began as a Christian movement committed to social justice and racial equality ended with nearly a thousand bloated bodies.

No matter how many more books appear, observers will likely never agree on what Jonestown meant or on who is authorized to interpret its legacy. Fielding McGehee, primary researcher at the Jonestown Institute, suggested when I interviewed him that Peoples Temple is like the proverbial elephant whose identity blind men try to discern: Was it a cult? Or a church? A social welfare agency? Or a political organization? The answer, said McGehee, is yes.

Reading this or any book about Jonestown inevitably feels like rubbernecking. But what ultimately makes *A Thousand Lives* so unsettling is not just the deaths of almost 1,000 people, including 300 children, or the bizarre behavior of its leader.



A Thousand Lives: The Untold Story of Hope, Deception, and Survival at Jonestown

By Julia Scheeres
Free Press, 320 pp., \$26.00

It is Scheeres's reminder that Peoples Temple could have appealed to you, me and her: anyone concerned about racism, gender inequality and poverty, anyone eager to belong to a community devoted to works of justice and compassion. Known for her best-selling memoir *Jesus Land*, Scheeres, who is white, writes that she and her adopted African-American brother "would have been thrilled and amazed by Peoples Temple, a church where blacks and whites worshiped side by side, the preacher taught social justice instead of damnation, and the gospel transported the congregation to a loftier realm. We longed for such a place."

In *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, scholar and pastor Mary McCormick Maaga suggests that outsiders may perceive the residents of Jonestown, like Edith Roller, as "the intimate other": someone who both resembles and frightens us, so we experience twin emotions of empathy and horror. This dual response—the realization that one could have been Scheeres's subject rather than her reader, paired with revulsion at what unfolded—is what makes it impossible to look away.

Scheeres spends several chapters excavating the early days of Peoples Temple, which became affiliated with the Disciples of Christ and practiced what Jones called "apostolic socialism," and following its migration from Indiana to California. She

Valerie Weaver-Zercher is a writer and editor in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

recounts the stories of people like Jim Bogue, a white man who hoped Peoples Temple would rebuild his crumbling marriage and family, and Stanley Clayton, a troubled black youth for whom Peoples Temple became a sanctuary from the streets and a family who believed in him.

Through staged healings, social gospel messages and personal charisma, Jones pulled into his orbit people disenchanted with churches' silence on social issues, and he fashioned himself as a civil rights leader. He began siphoning off members from black churches in San Francisco and Los Angeles, said McGehee of the Jonestown Institute. One elderly black survivor told McGehee that inside Peoples Temple Jim Jones was black, while outside the church he was white. Although most of Jones's inner circle were white, his seeming ability to slip back and forth across the race line—understanding the powerless but moving among the powerful—augmented his appeal. By quickly mobilizing his large congregation to vote in close elections, Jones endeared himself to influential players in California politics, including George Moscone and Harvey Milk.

But as pressure from negative press accounts and defectors increased, along with the possibility of tax fraud allegations, a deal negotiated with the Guyanese government—to lease 3,800 acres at 25 cents an acre—provided an escape route. Jones engineered the relocation of a thousand members of his flock to Guyana, creating promotional videos of his eponymous Guyanese commune as a utopian rural community, a promised land where they could escape the fascist project of "AmeriKKKa."

The bulk of Scheeres's book chronicles this era of Peoples Temple history. By the time of the exodus to Jonestown, according to Scheeres, Jones made little pretense of religious faith, and his movement had migrated toward a communal socialist politics rather than a Christian social gospel. Members' Bibles were confiscated, and Jones directed that a shipment of Gideon Bibles be used as toilet paper in the communal bathrooms. Some residents maintained private faith commitments, but outward allegiance had to be pledged to Jones and Jonestown, not Jesus. A custody battle, a vocal bloc of

relatives and defectors, and finally the visit of Representative Leo Ryan and reporters became the justification for Jones to enact his apocalyptic finale.

Scheeres focuses mainly on the stories of five Jonestown residents, four of whom survived. One myth surrounding Jonestown is that only a few survived, but those who died at Jonestown represented only about 20 percent of the Peoples Temple membership, according to McGehee. About 100 Temple members in Guyana survived the murder-suicides, including those who were in the capital of Georgetown, and at least 4,000 members remained in California. Add to that all the family members and friends of those who died at Jonestown, and the number of people who could be considered survivors of Jonestown is vast. McGehee said that if you are an African American of a certain age and live in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles or San Francisco, chances are good that you knew someone who died at Jonestown.

Scheeres does an impressive job of telling the stories of the rank and file of

Peoples Temple—people who were clearly victimized. She also explains Jones's behavior by highlighting the cocktail of zealotry, egomania, paranoia, drug use and conflict that fueled all of it. Less intelligible in Scheeres's account are the motivations of the Jonestown vanguard—the aides who helped to stage false attacks on Jonestown to convince residents that they were being persecuted, the nurses who injected unwilling Jonestown residents with the cyanide-laced Flavor Aid, the public relations "girls" stationed in the Guyanese capital who seduced officials in order to build alliances. Readers unfamiliar with the Jonestown story will be surprised at the extent to which a Peoples Temple intelligentsia served the movement until the end, writing legal briefs and representing Jones to the public. These and others in the inner circle were privy to Jones's manifold deceptions yet remained faithful to the cause. Many consented to Jones's corrupted version of Huey Newton's concept of "revolutionary suicide."

Both victims and masterminds of car-

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nage can be easier to comprehend than subcontractors of it, and Scheeres's focus on the kindly schoolteachers, on the one hand, and on Jones himself, on the other, does little to explain the complicity of these many adults in the final Jonestown event. As scholar Rebecca Moore suggests in *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, the popular literature about Jonestown "tends to blame the charismatic leader, and to exculpate his followers, for all that transpired." To understand the radical commitments of Jonestown leaders and their gradual acclimation to Jones's deviance, as well as the wider stream of cultural practices and ideologies from which Peoples Temple drew, one needs to turn to Moore's text and John R. Hall's *Gone from the Promised Land*. As those two books make clear, the Jonestown story can't be reduced to a narrative of innocent multitude versus megalomaniacal monster or of brainwashed cult versus enlightened opponents. The elephant is simply too big, and our vision too poor.

Scheeres's biggest misstep may be her dismissal of previous accounts of Jonestown as either "sensational media accounts" or "narrow academic studies." The literature on Jonestown is wide and deep, and it exists within a larger matrix of work about new religious movements. Although the Jonestown canon does feature some lurid tabloidism and fusty scholarship, it also includes several noteworthy books that are, like Scheeres's, humanizing, accessible accounts of the tragedy. Making one's way through well-traveled territory should not require pooh-poohing those whose tracks one follows.

Is there anything new in *A Thousand Lives*? Yes, although perhaps less than one might expect. The 50,000 recently released FBI files on Jonestown include reams of financial statements and correspondence that alter what was already known only a little. As psychologist Katherine Hill, who does research for the Jonestown Institute, suggests in a review of *A Thousand Lives*, "People unfamiliar with the details of Jonestown but with an interest in the subject matter will likely find this book intriguing. Those with a great deal of knowledge on Jonestown will likely not find a lot of new information here."

Scheeres's book has garnered favorable

reviews in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, but many of those close to the Jonestown story have had a more ambivalent reaction. McGehee said that some of the survivors whom Scheeres interviewed "felt she walked in the door with the story already written." In a review in the *Jonestown Report*, an annual publication detailing Jonestown-related research, one survivor writes that *A Thousand Lives* "seems heavy on abuse and discipline, and light on the personal, social and psychological rewards of the communal, politically engaged life." It was these rewards, claims Kathy Tropp Barbour in the *Jonestown Report*, that "at least while Peoples Temple was still state-side, made so few of us members seriously entertain the idea of leaving."

A Thousand Lives has its failings, but it deserves attention for its carefully rendered portrait of Jonestown members who, Scheeres claims, should be remembered as "noble idealists." Her examination of how utopian idealism slid into dystopian nightmare, and of the powerful curry of apocalyptic ideology and charismatic authority that led hundreds to consent to their own deaths, is compelling. Ultimately, the strength of the book lies in the author's restraint and her avoidance of flourishes, which allows the stories of her main characters to be heard. An example of this is the scene in which survivor Hyacinth Thrash, an elderly Jonestown resident who slept through the poisoning, learns of the tragedy. Thrash's story has been told in a self-published book titled *The Onliest One Alive*; Scheeres's book makes it available to a general readership.

Scheeres knows better than to create any literary special effects or to attempt any commentary as she tells the story of Thrash waking up on the morning of November 19, 1978, the day after the murder-suicides. Thrash notices that her roommates, who had gone to a hastily called meeting at the pavilion the day before, have not returned. As we watch Thrash hobble out the door of her cottage, in that last moment before discovering that her loved ones are all dead, we too are confused by the "deep stillness" that greets her. We too find ourselves blinking in the Guyanese sun, wondering what on earth could have gone wrong.

Visions of a Better World: Howard Thurman's Pilgrimage to India and the Origins of African American Nonviolence

By Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt
Beacon, 272 pp., \$34.95

In 1942 a reporter from an "influential black newspaper" noted that Howard Thurman was "not sufficiently known to the general public." Thurman was at that time a professor and dean of the chapel at Howard University, a leader in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and a very active lecturer. Black opinion makers speculated cautiously that he might be the person to lead a nonviolent freedom movement. Yet he was then and he remains less well known than his status and public witness might imply. And his most enduring books appeared only after 1945, when he was already in his mid-forties.

Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt focus on the first half of Thurman's life, finding there not only the deep and complex roots of his mature works, but also a far-reaching influence on historical events and actors. Both authors are historians and editors of the Howard Thurman Papers Project. Unlike earlier biographies, their work draws extensively on manuscripts and publications that were not widely circulated. The first two chapters survey Thurman's early years and formation. The central section describes his trip to India from genesis to completion. The remainder of the book delves more deeply into that experience and its consequences.

Thurman himself said that his trip to India, in 1935 and 1936, was a turning point in his life. This book argues that it shaped his advocacy of racial equality, spiritual power and nonviolent revolution. Clearly he learned much from his six months there and from his meetings with Mohandas Gandhi and the scholar of religion Kshiti Mohan Sen. But the authors think that the crucial event for

Reviewed by Patricia Appelbaum, an independent scholar and author of *Kingdom to Commune: Protestant Pacifist Culture between World War I and the Vietnam Era*.

Thurman was a moment of epiphany at the Khyber Pass. There he began to see India as a model for the Christian church: spiritually intense, yet plural and flexible. This experience, they tell us, crystallized his sense of the need for a new kind of Christianity, rebuilt from the ground up and intentionally interracial—a spiritual fellowship that could generate a new society.

Over the next decade, say the authors, Thurman struggled to work out an intellectual and religious framework for the social change he envisioned. Their discussion of this process is perhaps overly condensed. But their task was not easy: Thurman's thought incorporated ideas from the political left, the black intelligentsia, the social gospel, neoorthodoxy and Jeffersonian democratic ideals, as well as "visceral" insights from India about race and imperialism.

He was equally concerned with practice. Like his pacifist contemporaries, he recognized the limits of reasoned persuasion and struggled toward moral consistency in an imperfect world. The authors argue that Thurman's ministry at the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, beginning in 1943, was the expression of his lifelong religious commitment and the culmination of the India trip. It was an attempt to create and model the interracial Christian community he had imagined. Their historical account exposes the spadework that went into the church's founding, as well as its growth, tensions and qualified success.

A highlight of the book is its treatment of Thurman's oral communication. The authors make the insightful point that his public speaking, teaching and mentoring constituted a significant body of work. From news reports, letters and memoirs, they unfold a careful and creative reconstruction of Thurman's speaking and its impact. Thurman did not use what we think of as a traditional African-American preaching style, though he did draw on educated black exemplars. Instead, his speech was "elevated, dense, allusive," poetic and difficult. Yet many listeners remembered a quality of intimacy to his discourse, a sense that he was "speaking to them personally." He was popular with both black and white audiences. While he rarely spoke directly

about racial issues, he was conscious, especially before white audiences, that "his speech was about race before he opened his mouth."

The sense of intimacy and engagement in his public speaking was also part of his skill as a mentor to young adults. "Mentorship," the authors comment, "is even more ephemeral than sermonic performance," but they find ample testimony to Thurman's care for individuals and small groups as a pastor, professor and conference leader. Among his many significant protégés were Pauli Murray and James Farmer, pioneers of Gandhian activism in the early 1940s.

Throughout the book the authors trace political and religious themes that engaged Thurman through most of his life—among them the "religion of Jesus," mystical spirituality and women's equality. I particularly appreciated their ironic eye on spirituals. By Thurman's time these vernacular hymns were apparently becoming something of a racially tinged cliché, and he was frequently irritated by requests to perform them. We are left to imagine how those experiences shaped his two books on spirituals.

The book is marred a bit by editorial lapses in quotation and usage. Information drawn from published sources occasionally loses something in the transition; for example, the discussion of the India trip seems to dismiss the multi-talented E. Stanley Jones as just another evangelist, whereas Thurman's autobiography provides a more nuanced description. The endnotes would be easier to use if the publisher had provided running heads with page references.

On more substantive matters, the authors insist throughout that Thurman's Christianity was unconventional, but I wonder if they have overstated their case. Certainly he arrived at a unitarian Christology and experienced powerful spiritual communion with non-Christians. And it is true that the covenants at Fellowship Church became increasingly interreligious over time. But Christian liberals always lived near interreligious boundaries, and Thurman did continue to identify himself as a Christian. Even though he resisted alignments with orthodox confessions and institutions, he can be located within an

American tradition of nondoctrinal mystical Protestantism.

I wonder, too, if the authors' careful historical account of Thurman's early life undermines their own argument to some extent. As they note, the roots of his political thought went back to the early 1920s. He knew of Gandhi's work from both African-American and pacifist sources and must have known Richard Gregg's practical interpretations of Gandhi as well. His misgivings about traditional Christianity reached back into childhood and took shape during his studies with Rufus Jones in 1929. Might he have come to much the same place in the world without visiting India at all?

But to ask this question is to second-guess history. The fact is that he did go, and it did have an indisputable effect on him—and through him, on countless others. Dixie and Eisenstadt have provided a unique and compelling account of Thurman's formation and influence.

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When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice

By Terry Tempest Williams
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 224 pp., \$23.00

Some things to know about the American writer Terry Tempest Williams: She wrote a masterpiece (*Refuge*, a brilliant braiding of her mother's death and the flooding of the Great Salt Lake), which should be in print as long as America is a nation. She has done as much as anyone in America in the last 30 years to conserve and protect and celebrate wild land as a priceless American patrimony, bringing a charismatic eloquence and passion to bear on what is finally a moral decision between theft and reverence. Few writers in our language today have anything close to her astounding gift for listening and witness, as well as singing the grace and courage of other beings.

Yet she has also written books in which her incredible gift for witness is applied almost solely to herself alone; her work verges so close to poetry that when it does not work in service to story it often comes off as mere mannerism; and she says of herself in her newest book that she is "selfish, self-absorbed, overwrought, in denial, broken."

You see the point. Here is a writer of stunning spiritual and artistic power; there are essays and passages in her work that make your heart sing and your brain shimmer, and her books *Refuge*, *An Unspoken Hunger* and *The Open Space of Democracy* ought to be required reading for citizenship in these United States. But here too is a writer who spends pages and even whole books staring in the mirror, mistaking journal entries for literature, drawn endlessly to herself in the mistaken belief that indulgence is prism. In short, Terry Tempest Williams is an amazing and frustrating paradox. That is surely the story of all writers, and all readers too; it's also a fair review of *When Women Were Birds*.

But oh, the sudden brilliance! "I drink, I burn, I gather dreams. And sometimes I tell a story." "I want to be read, I want to be heard. . . . Writing

requires an aching curiosity leading you to discover, uncover what is gnawing at your bones. Words have a weight to them." Indeed they do, and when they are marshaled and jazzed in service to story—as with a long passage here about Nushu, a now-dying secret language of women in China—the reader is enlightened, moved, elevated. A secret language of women, a code, "a whispered language"!

The structure of the book: when Williams's mother died, she left her only daughter all her journals, "three shelves of beautiful clothbound books, the spines of each perfectly aligned against the lip of the shelves. I opened the first journal. It was empty. I opened the second journal. It was empty. . . . Shelf after shelf after shelf, all my Mother's journals were blank." So Williams, in a sense, fills those journals with her own musings about mother and daughter, women in Mormon culture, women in many human cultures. One way to read *When Women Were Birds* is to consider it a swirling meditation on women in the world, using the author's experiences as filter; another way to read it is as something like the 14th volume of Williams's memoirs, a long tome filled with both heartbreaking brilliance and endless pondering of breaking away from church and male dominance.

If ever there were a modern writer who deserved and would be handsomely served by an anthology of her works, Terry Tempest Williams is the one. If ever there were a writer who deserved a two-volume Library of America set, Terry Tempest Williams is the one. The first, slim book would be *Refuge* in toto, and the second, fat one would be selections from her 30 years of work as a fine essayist, gifted polemicist, graceful naturalist, empathetic folklorist and riveting speaker. She's a good candidate for such an honor on the basis of the substance of her work alone; she stands in the front rank of the great bloom of nature writers of our time, with Edward Abbey and Barry Lopez, Mary Oliver and Peter Matthiessen.

Some of Williams's work gets eerily

Reviewed by Brian Doyle, author of *Grace Notes*, a collection of spiritual essays.

and wonderfully close to the great shivering spaces among words, the places where words fall off the things we try to explain with them, and we gape and can only muster stories; but the price of her gift, as so often happens with gifted poets, is how often it misses. It's unfair to Williams to want to hear her most substantive and least self-absorbed voice all the time. No one is that consistent, not even a genius like Mark Twain or Van Morrison, and an artist can use only the tools she has been given. But it is a mark of both Williams's past achievement and her future promise that reading *When Women Were Birds* forces you back to her best essays—to remember, with something like awe, what she can do and, God willing, will do again.

The Nature Principle: Human Restoration and the End of Nature-Deficit Disorder

By Richard Louv
Algonquin, 320 pp., \$24.95

When I was a kid, I spent my suburban summer days exploring the nooks and crannies of my backyard, roaming the woods with my siblings and friends and riding my bike on long expeditions. "Be home when the street lights come on," was the general rule Mom gave us. The outdoors was our second home, where we played, lived and learned.

The way of life that I took for granted is gone.

"Children's ability to roam has basically been destroyed," wrote Microsoft senior researcher Danah Boyd in the *New York Times* earlier this year. "Letting your child out to bike around the neighborhood is seen as terrifying now, even though by all measures, life is safer for kids today."

In *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (2005), Richard Louv sounded an alarm over the loss of outdoor experiences for children. He tied attention disorders, obesity and depression to a lack of time outdoors. The book became an unlikely inter-

national bestseller and launched a renewed effort on the part of educators and parents to reintroduce children to nature. Louv clearly struck a nerve.

Not only children, however, need to be outdoors. In his latest book, *The Nature Principle*, Louv expands his premise to include adults. He believes that seven nature-based precepts can reshape our lives, including balancing technology with nature; achieving a mind/body/nature connection; incorporating biophilic design in our homes, communities and workplaces; and giving natural history more importance. "For the jaded and weary among us, the outdoor world can expand our senses and reignite a sense of awe and wonder not felt since we were children; it can support better health, enhanced creativity, new careers and business opportunities," writes Louv. "Nature can help us feel fully alive."

Adults need "vitamin N"—the mind/body/nature connection—for physical, emotional and family fitness, Louv contends. In a moving example, he recounts his own growing-up years and his family's connections to the land. He then traces his family's gradual disconnection from nature, which parallels his father's spiraling depression and eventual suicide. "Which came first, the illness or the withdrawal from nature?" he writes. "I honestly don't know. . . . Nature alone would not have cured him, but I have no doubt it would have helped."

Louv calls for new ways of thinking about our environment, including rethinking the vocabulary we use. He points out that sustainability falls short of the relationship we should have with nature. After all, would we want a merely sustainable marriage? Our language should reflect the richer relationship with nature that we desire: "We need new or refreshed ways to describe a hybrid world in which technology and nature are balanced, in which we experience the deeper powers of nature in our everyday lives."

He affirms and expands on how nature is essential for our mental and physical health—and our very souls. "It's

hard to fathom how any kind of spiritual intelligence is possible without an appreciation for nature," Louv writes. "Most of us intuitively understand that all spiritual life, however it is defined, begins with and is nourished by a sense of wonder. The natural world is one of our most reliable windows into wonder and, at least to some, into a spiritual intelligence."

I appreciate Louv's emphasis on our need to have a sense of place, especially in a world where so much time is spent in virtual reality. He echoes the late Minnesota writer Paul Gruchow when he reminds us that knowing *who* we are requires knowing *where* we are. "As our lives grow more technological, media-dominated, and abstract, our hunger for a more authentic sense of personal and community identity will grow," contends Louv.

Louv relies on stories and personal reflection as well as emerging research to make his points throughout the book. He sprinkles his own reflections among thoughts from Edward Abbey, E. O. Wilson, Aldo Leopold and others, and includes an extensive recommended reading list at the end of the book, with works from authors ranging from Diane Ackerman to Yi-Fu Tuan.

Although this solid, thoughtful book lacks some of the passion and energy of *Last Child in the Woods*, there is plenty for readers to chew on. Rather than strident, Louv's voice is gently urgent. He invites us rather than guilt us into reconnecting with God's restorative and ever-amazing creation. Read this and be inspired to take a dose of vitamin N.

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Reviewed by Cindy Crosby, author of *By Willow Brook: Exploring the Landscape of Prayer*.

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Postliberal Theology and the Church Catholic: Conversations with George Lindbeck, David Burrell and Stanley Hauerwas

Edited by John Wright
Baker Academic, 176 pp., \$26.99 paperback

Wright attempts to reestablish an original concern of postliberalism, namely, the visible unity of the church catholic. He links postliberalism to the tradition of the "Great Church" as well as Vatican II. Postliberalism, Wright argues, is "a contemporary retrieval of Augustinian Thomism through interaction with twentieth-century linguistic philosophy." The bulk of the book consists of separate interviews with Lindbeck (whose 1984 *The Nature of Doctrine* gave impetus to postliberalism), Burrell and Hauerwas. The interviews are followed by a conversation between these three theologians. In addition to discussing their own interests in postliberalism and ecumenism, they talk about sources and the development of their theologies.

The Presidents and Their Faith: From George Washington to Barack Obama

By Darrin Grinder and Steve Shaw
Russell Media, 272 pp., \$14.99 paperback

An acceptable degree of religiosity has been an unwritten requirement of the American presidency since its inception, and every man who has held that office has claimed either a devout faith or a working relationship with the divine, the particulars of which seem less important to the voting public than the claim itself. Those particulars, however, are what Grinder and Shaw argue have a lasting effect on American politics. They examine the faith of the presidents by quoting their writings or extrapolating from their policies and personal habits. Whether grappling with slavery, war, foreign affairs, poverty or new military technology, the presidents often demonstrated a deepening, thoughtful attitude toward God—even those who faked it to get elected—when under the burden of their office.

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ON Music

Pull It Together

by Shannon Stephens
(Asthmatic Kitty)

On her third album, Shannon Stephens reins in her chamber-folk experimentalism in favor of a bluesy little band that takes her songs to unexpected places. Her sound remains relatively subdued, yet it grooves and pops and even swaggers.

Stephens's songcraft is best at its most complex when her melodies and chord progressions dart around a little. "Care of You" is a standout; it quickly locates a darker corner of Americana, throws it a few pleasing curve balls and wraps up in three minutes flat. The disappointing "Buddy Up to the Bully," however, starts in a predictable blues-rock spot and simply stays put.

Both songs feature a signature trait: Stephens's emotionally immediate lyrics. These she writes with too much flair to come off as overearnest; her words are confident, colorful and sometimes sarcastic. On "Out of Sight," an electric piano groove sets up this attention-getter: "Oh the world owes me a living / Because I'm wonderful." Having concisely established a persona of youthful entitlement, she soon turns its ungrateful attention to God: "He's the one who made my life / How about making it less difficult?" The more sincere songs take the occasional turn toward sentimental cliché. But overall Stephens connects, offering direct language line to line and ambitious themes song to song.

Most ambitious is the deadpan "Faces Like Ours," a wryly political take on the conversational duets of old Nashville. Stephens and guest vocalist Will Oldham trade comforting lines about why they're "gonna be alright"—because of the various demographic traits that inflate their chances. As they name these one by one (e.g., "At least we have white skin"), a



LYRICS WITH A FLAIR: Shannon Stephens's words are confident, colorful and sometimes sarcastic.

subtler critique emerges: privilege is a complex thing, and we can be blind to the whole even as we name its parts.

"Faces Like Ours" pulls out a lot of classic country stops, down to the lap steel and corny jokes. The setting also highlights the limits of Stephens's singing: alongside Oldham's subtle husk, she sounds too sweet and a bit thin. Throughout the record, Stephens sings with great control and technical nuance, up high and way down low. But often her voice is spot-on yet nondescript, like a great backup singer accustomed to filling a small sonic space.

She sounds best on the quieter material. "Cold November" is very good, a smoky old slow number accompanied by offbeat upright piano and ethereal voices. So is album closer "Responsible Too Long," an emotive ballad that begins statically but soon builds toward classic pop lushness. It's a late Beach Boys move, but a graceful and surprising one that demonstrates Stephens's expansive imagination and her band's deft touch. It sounds at once familiar and fresh, as good pop music always does.

Kisses on the Bottom

by Paul McCartney

[Hear]

The first question to ask about a Paul McCartney standards album is why it took him so long. The guy's always been fascinated by the American Songbook, and unlike some pop singers who have taken detours to the land of jazzy old tunes and swinging little combos, Sir Paul has a powerful and chameleonic voice.

Perhaps it's because his elder statesman identity is primarily as a songwriter. McCartney contributes two originals here. "Only Our Hearts" sounds like a real live 1940s song, though not a memorable one; the stronger "My Valentine" juxtaposes period harmony with a more modern feel. On these and on the covers—a well-chosen mix of the familiar and the less so—McCartney delivers with a soft-lit croon.

It's a shame, though, that he doesn't play on the album—and that the arrangements stick with the lounge-swing script, all polish and no spark. Given the skillful yet unorthodox ways McCartney has been known to attack instruments and mixing boards over the years, this could have been something a lot more interesting.

A Wasteland Companion

by M. Ward

[Merge]

M. Ward's solo albums reveal that he surpasses his more-famous collaborators (Conor Oberst, Zooey Deschanel) on all fronts. His sound has a sepia-toned timelessness; it's both inventive and a whole bunch of kinds of old-fashioned. On his latest, Ward's folk and old jazz fascinations remain, but his interest in early rock 'n' roll is now just as prominent. In "I Get Ideas," he combines scorching rockabilly with jazz-age innuendo: "When we're dancing and you're dangerously close to me / I get ideas."

Ward's always been interested in themes of spirituality and redemption. "Clean Slate" speaks of the grace that eventually follows pain and despair; elsewhere Ward is similarly upbeat, singing of love and joy. His arrangements explode in dramatic flashes of strings

and crystalline piano and vocal oohs, but this never gets overlarge or lasts too long. As always, his songs surprise and delight without losing their essential intimacy. Highly recommended.

Let It Burn

by Ruthie Foster

[Blue Corn]

Ruthie Foster has a powerhouse of a blues/gospel voice, which she never allows to overpower a song. If you're not sold already, Foster made her newest album in New Orleans with the Blind Boys of Alabama and a cast of hotshot players. It wouldn't have killed them to restrain the Hammond organ player once in a while, but that's being picky: the project brings a truckload of soul and grit.

Foster contributes just two original songs. Both sound good, especially "Lord Remember Me" with its a capella opening. But the main event is covers, sometimes dramatically reimagined. "You Don't Miss Your Water" is particularly good, a swing blues groove upping the soul ballad's energy much as the Byrds' countrified version did—though Foster's approach also sits well under a guest vocal by the original performer, William Bell.

"Ring of Fire" fails as a ballad, its lyrics stripped of all danger. And while "If I Had a Hammer" certainly needed a less relentlessly cheery makeover, there was no need to get rid of the song's word-painting backbeat. Otherwise, Foster offers great and infectious stuff.

—Steve Thorngate

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Monsieur Lazhar

Written and directed by Philippe Falardeau
Starring Mohamed Fellag, Danielle Proulx,
Émilien Néron and Sophie Nélisse

Movies about education are seldom convincing; their depiction of what goes on in the classroom hardly ever tallies with our own experiences of the bumps and leaps in the learning process or of the teachers who affected our lives. So the sweet and poignant Quebecois film *Monsieur Lazhar*, about an Algerian refugee who spends a few months teaching at an elementary school in Montreal, is a rare pleasure.

Writer-director Philippe Falardeau begins with the intersection of two tragedies. A sixth-grade teacher dies suddenly, and the principal (Danielle Proulx) is at a loss to find an immediate replacement mid-year. So when an Algerian immigrant named Bachir Lazhar (Mohamed Fellag, in a performance of tremendous charm) presents himself in her office, claiming to have pedagogical experience in his homeland, she hires him pretty much on the spot. What she doesn't know is that he's not a permanent resident but a widowed refugee applying for political asylum.

Bachir teaches by instinct, and his old-world graciousness and traditionalism at first puzzle the children and then fascinate them. His fellow teachers are drawn to his warmth and generosity of spirit. But the rules that restrict 21st-century teachers—the caution with which they're ordered to approach their students physically, the way they're supposed to paper over their observations about their pupils with cheery platitudes when they discuss their progress with their parents—befuddle him. And his experience with loss and grief runs counter to the strict instructions he gets from the principal to avoid talking to the students about their previous teacher's death; that task is left to the school psychologist, whose assessment of their psychic progress Bachir finds convenient and implausible.

The entire ensemble is excellent, includ-



SUPER SUB: The sudden death of a teacher leaves an elementary school principal with little choice but to quickly hire Algerian immigrant Bachir Lazhar (Mohamed Fellag).

ing Brigitte Poupart and Jules Philip as Bachir's colleagues, but Falardeau does his most remarkable work with the young actors. The children are as unself-conscious and naturally funny as the schoolboys in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. (It's clear, in fact, that in some scenes Falardeau has Truffaut in mind.) Émilien Néron is remarkably good as a boy named Simon, as is Sophie Nélisse as Simon's friend Alice, whose anger at him fuels an explosion in Bachir's classroom. Alice, the most outspoken child in the class, becomes Bachir's most devoted student. In one lovely interlude, he opens her desk while she and the others are out at recess and finds she's taped up a photo of Algiers with a heart scribbled on it.

A conventional filmmaker would paint the principal, Vaillancourt, as an unthinking rulemonger and the gym teacher, Gaston (Philip), as the sexist boor he comes across as in his first few scenes. But Vaillancourt struggles with the social and legal demands of her job, which she doesn't believe in, and when Gaston tells a story about his own son both his sensitivity and his sensibility shine through. *Monsieur Lazhar* is modest, but it has depth of both feeling and observation. It earns our respect as well as our affection by never stooping to fakery.

Bully

Directed by Lee Hirsch

Lee Hirsch's documentary *Bully* rings false from beginning to end. The

film wants to sound alarm bells about the prevalence of bullying in public schools, which is certainly a very real problem. But like the recently completed trilogy of TV documentaries about the child murders at Robin Hood Hills and the young men who were evidently scapegoated for the crime, the movie has a tawdry, voyeuristic quality that keeps distracting you from its alleged agenda.

There are other reasons to question Hirsch's integrity. The cases he follows are reported in such a haphazard, inconclusive way—especially the one involving a girl who, apparently out of frustration with the way she's been treated by her classmates, terrorizes them on a school bus with her mother's gun—that you don't know what to make of them, and you certainly don't trust his reductive perspective.

Hirsch is even worse as a filmmaker. He has no sense of rhythm, and he doesn't seem to understand the value of varying the tone—so the children's stories come across as an unending parade of misery. It's hard to think of another documentary that contains so many close-ups of people crying: Hirsch must think that tears are evidence of authenticity. *Bully* is about as persuasive as a reality TV show, and given its subject matter it's considerably more offensive.

Reviewed by Steve Vineberg, who teaches at the College of the Holy Cross.

by Rodney Clapp

American SOUNDINGS

The standard view of life after death has long focused on a disembodied soul that, immediately pursuant to the expiration of the body, goes either to heaven or to hell. I remember the sermon preached at my father's funeral some years ago. It was classic Platonism—Dad's soul had now escaped the entrapping shell of his cancer-ravaged body and was free in the beautiful communion of heaven.

Christian scholars have long questioned this easy dualism of body and soul. Karl Barth, for instance, insisted that the more biblical view calls us to see ourselves as both “ensouled bodies” and “embodied souls.” But the standard view has remained strong, especially in everyday church circles. That may be changing, as a passel of recent books indicate.

Premier among them is N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. Rob Bell's best-seller *Love Wins* follows Wright in putting the post-mortem emphasis on resurrected bodies in the context of a new heaven and a new earth. More recently Howard Snyder and Joel Scandrett, in *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, make an extended argument that salvation focuses not just on souls and not just on people, but presents the hope of a transformed and new earth. Meanwhile, biblical scholar Richard Middleton is at work on a book that will closely examine the major

Life after life after death

biblical texts and argue for the eschatological hope of a new heaven and a new earth.

This sea change in thinking is largely because scholars have reappraised the New Testament with a keener eye to its Hebraic roots. The body-soul dualism of Greek thought always fit uneasily at best with the Old Testament, which contains only glimmers of an afterlife and remains throughout very this-worldly. Rereading the New Testament in a more Hebraic light has brought to the fore several texts that point to an eschatology that is focused not on disembodied souls but on resurrected bodies and a transformed earth.

Scholars in the midst of this reappraisal build on Old Testament texts such as Isaiah 65:17–25, where God declares, “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth,” a new earth in which weeping will be heard no more, where there will be no hunger or infant death, and where the wolf and lamb will feed together side by side. They consider also Micah 4:1–4, an eschatological text that looks to the day when nations will “learn war” no more, and so they “shall beat their swords into plowshares.”

They then turn to New Testament texts such as Romans 8, in which Paul envisions a creation “groaning” in wait of its transformation and promises: “He who raised Christ from the dead will give

life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (v. 11). Elsewhere Paul declares that the God who raised Jesus will also raise us by his power (1 Cor. 6:13–15) and mulls at length on the nature of our resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15).

The eschatological hope of reembodiment and a renewed earth doesn't belong to Paul alone. Second Peter 3:13 reads that “in accordance with his [God's] promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” And of course there are chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation, in which the seer beholds “a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (21:1) and focuses on a resplendent New Jerusalem, into which the nations will proceed by the light of the Lamb and offer up all their glories (22:23–24).

Such texts suggest that the new view is not so new but is indeed a recovery of an old and more decidedly biblical view of death and the afterlife. The “new” view changes the complexion of funeral sermons: less attention should rest on where the departed has gone immediately and more attention on the new heavens and new earth we all can ultimately look forward to, in resurrected bodies. The new view also puts more value on the earth, which will not after all

simply be destroyed and pass away but will itself be renewed.

The new view also comports well with advances in neurological science, which by way of MRIs and other techniques has observed evidence of religious experience in the brain. Such evidence suggests that the (physical) brain and the soul are not strictly separated.

Of course, the new view raises a number of questions. Probably the most pressing pastoral question is about the nature of the soul and what happens to us, to my “I” and your “you,” immediately after death. Some expect a kind of soul sleep until the day of resurrection. Others point to eternity's comprehension of all time—past, present and future—so that the dead enter into an eternity where the resurrection future has already occurred.

However such quandaries are resolved, the new view decidedly shifts the emphasis to the eschatological Resurrection Day of corporate and final judgment. As Wright puts it, the biblical picture is ultimately focused not on individual life directly after death but on “life after life after death.” The new view can certainly preach. It will be interesting to see if this recent cascade of books, aimed at the church even more than the academy, will bring changes in attitudes and hopes to the daily lives of congregations.

Rodney Clapp's Soundings column appears in every other issue.

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Rising

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—Lois Huey-Heck

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